

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
I for Isobel

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AUTHOR NOTES

The author of *I for Isobel* was Amy Witting. Amy was born in Annandale, an inner suburb of Sydney, in 1918. She attended Sydney University, then after graduating began teaching French and English in state schools. Amy began late in her life where she successfully published six novels, including *The Visit*, *I for Isobel*, *Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop* and *Maria's War*; two collections of short stories; two books of verse, *Travel Diary* and *Beauty is the Straw*; and her *Collected Poems*.

Amy also had numerous poems and short stories published in magazines such as *Quadrant* and *The New Yorker*. Her acclaimed short fiction is collected in the volume *Faces and Voices*.

In 1993, Amy Witting was awarded the Patrick White Prize. *Isobel on the way to the Corner Shop* won the Age Book of the Year Award.

Amy Witting died in 2001.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Isobel's childhood is plagued by poverty, which also arises at several other points in the novel. The poverty faced by Isobel's family is illustrated largely through her mother's words and actions. It is her mother's pride which seems to drive her shame; an example being when she believed that Isobel was begging on her previous birthday, after which she comes home with a skirt filled with coins.

At one point, Isobel describes her mother as being possessed by the poverty they endured: "at home we had a wild beast of poverty which broke loose now and then and filled the air with screaming" (p.15).

Poverty is also used as the premise for psychological warfare by Isobel's mother, who declared a number of times that there would be no birthday present for Isobel. Despite the birthday present drought, Isobel maintains her hope that it would be different this year. Furthermore, the family continued to take holidays in the boarding house, to keep up appearances, which were so important to Isobel's mother.

World War II, and a disdain for Germany and Hitler, are also alluded to, while Isobel is working at the office. For example, when Isobel has to translate German telegrams, she seeks to purchase a German dictionary, and is exposed to the contempt for Germany through the bookseller, who expresses his disdain by giving Isobel the German dictionary for free, which he seems pleased to get rid of. The proprietor looks at it with contempt and says 'I won't charge you for that. You can have it' (p.58).

GENRE

I for Isobel is by and large a semi-autobiographical novel. Amy Witting, like Isobel, had a difficult childhood. Her life, in many ways, mirrored that of the protagonist we are exposed to in the novel. For example, the hardship that we observe Isobel encountering and the pressures that she experienced at home and at school were based on Witting's own experiences.

It is written under a pseudonym, with her real name being Joan Levick. The third person narrative at times lapses into a first-person reflection. At several points in the novel, the narrator refers to the protagonist affectionately as "our Isobel" to elicit empathy, so that we, as readers, feel for the struggling Isobel and the pathos of the situations she is forced to endure.

First person narration occurs when Isobel is talking to herself; for example, on page 10, Isobel says to herself: "you could not make yourself feel safe if you tried", reflecting the self-effacing attitude that is so ingrained in her psyche.