ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“*I for Isobel*”

Text guide by: Daniela Ouzecki
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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 that 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. It is, by and large, a third person narrative, which 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 draw on the reader’s empathy, so that we, as readers, feel for the struggling Isobel and the pathos of the situations she is forced to endure.

The instances of it being a first person narrative occur where 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.
STRUCTURE

The novel is constructed chronologically, beginning with Isobel at aged nine. It explores the major turning points of her life. It is through the advent of these key events that we engage with the character of Isobel. For example, the deaths of her parents mark the beginning of a new Isobel. Furthermore, the emergence of Isobel is signposted by symbolic transitions, such as when she is given the brooch for her birthday. Her acute awareness of its significance is clear when she realises that she would be wearing it in some form all her life, as the brooch represented the first time she had something that nobody, including her mother, could take from her.

The third person narrative allows us to go inside Isobel’s head, where she believes that she is not in control of her actions as she begins to believe the accusations of her mother, who continues to accuse her of being a compulsive liar. Isobel begins to attribute her behaviour to the uncontrollable ‘word factory’ which is driven by what she perceives to be an ‘idiot in the attic’.

We are also exposed to the machinations of her heart, which she rarely exposes, even to herself, as she learnt very early that emotions were not to be disclosed.

All the events and conversations explored by the narrator aim to give the reader an insight into why Isobel is the person we encounter.

The novel draws to a conclusion, when she goes back to the location of her childhood traumas and faces them with courage and insight. Only then is she free from the insecurity that has haunted her during her entire life. Closure has been achieved at the end, signified by Isobel going to the store to buy an exercise book to begin what seems to be the writing of the book that we have just read. Thus in some ways, the novel can be described as a circular narrative which, in one way, ends where it begins.