

Under the Skin Study Guide

Under the Skin by Michel Faber

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Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle version of *Under the Skin*, published July 16, 2001.

Isserley knew what it was like to look different from the others of her species in the novel *Under the Skin* by Michael Faber. She considered the surgery she underwent to make her body look like that of a vodsel a small price to pay to keep her from going to work in the underground New Estates. Isserley rethought her career when she met Amlis Vess, an elite who was staunchly against killing vodsels for meat. She additionally had an experience where a hitchhiker tried to rape her, an incident that made her realize she suffered more during her job than her victims did. The novel addresses the idea that it is language that separates the humans from the animals and that injustice can come in a variety of forms. The barriers to relationships between males and females are also discussed.

Isserley's job required her to bring back well-muscled, well-formed men for the meat processing plant at Vess Incorporated's Ablach Farm. She preyed on hitchhikers and weeded out men who would not be missed by getting to know them as well as possible in their short time in the car together. When she decided she had an ideal specimen, she activated drug injectors in the passenger seat of her car. This drug sedated the men until she could get them to Ablach Farms, where they would be processed.

In order to do her job, Isserley had to undergo surgery to make her look less like a human being and more like a vodsel. In this novel, human beings are four-legged furred creatures while vodsels are two-legged creatures. Even though she had been promised by several male members of elite society that she would not have to go work in the New Estates, an underground world, Isserley found herself there anyway. She was given the choice to stay there or be surgically manipulated so she could look and walk like a vodsel. By choosing to live above ground and be manipulated, Isserley had to work as a lure for the vodsels. She was even given an enormous pair of breasts that the other humans knew would attract vodsels to her.

Isserley began to realize how cruel her job was when she met the elite Amlis Vess, the son of her boss. Although he was heir to Vess Incorporated, Amlis believed it was cruel to kill the vodsels for meat. Isserley was attracted to Amlis first because of his beauty and then because of his acceptance of her.

Even before she began to take seriously what Amlis had to say about the cruelty of the production at Ablach Farm, Isserley had an experience that had already begun to make her question if she wanted to continue her job. A hitchhiker she picked up tried to rape her and did force her to perform oral sex on him. Isserley felt violated and realized how her victims must feel as a result of this experience.

While Isserley was trying to decide what she wanted to do since she left Ablach Farm, she unwillingly picked up her final hitchhiker. He stopped her by stepping in front of her



car because his girlfriend was having a baby and he needed a ride to the hospital. During the ride he talked to Isserley about the awe he felt concerning the impending birth of his baby. He also shared with her that he thought death was not the end of one's life but that a creature might come back in another, better, form. As she drove, Isserley's car malfunctioned and she ran into a tree.

Because she was trapped in the car and badly injured, Isserley set off a bomb that had been specially put into her car in case she ever needed to dispose of herself. She told herself that by destroying herself, she would become part of the universe and all of the things that she thought were so beautiful.



Chapter 1

Summary

In Chapter 1, Isserley never picked up a hitchhiker the first time she passed him on the road. Before she stopped she had to make sure he was a good specimen, well muscled and not puny. She would drive past the hitchhiker again, slowly, if he was a male who caught her interest to make sure he was really the type she wanted.

Almost every day for years she had been driving the A9 in the Highlands of Scotland looking for hitchhikers to pick up. The red Corolla she drove began to rattle and she wondered what was causing the rattle. She had liked a Nissan she had years earlier but had to stop driving it. The Corolla was temperamental and the customized parts did not work correctly.

Isserley finally found a man who met her standards and picked him up. She talked to him, trying to find out if he was really a good choice or not. She did not want to learn at the last minute that he had a wife or girlfriend waiting for him. Isserley also wondered what he thought about her. The hitchhiker did notice Isserley's breasts, but also noticed that she was short and shaped in a funny way. He also noticed how strange her hands looked, big and narrow. He could not see her face very well; it was hidden behind her hair and the thick glasses she wore.

Isserley had just about decided the man was not right for her and was probably on his way to visit his children, whom he had said were living with his wife from whom he was divorced. She learned at the last minute that he never saw his kids. When she found this out, Isserley flipped a switch on her steering wheel. The switch triggered needles inside the passenger seat to give the man a dose of icpathua, enough to make him unconscious. Another button on the dashboard made the windows turn dark. Under this cover she put a wig and pair of glasses on the hitchhiker, and covered him with a jacket — cut in half so she could tuck it around him like he was wearing it — from the back of her car. After she was finished she headed back home.

Analysis

This first chapter of the novel makes what Isserley is doing to the hitchhikers that she picks up very lurid and sexual in nature. Almost as if she is a female predator taking advantage of males. There are several phrases in this chapter that lead the reader to believe that Isserley's interests are sexual in nature. For instance she was "savouring the thought of how superb he'd be once he was naked" (5). On that same page Isserley makes a reference to waiting to be "sure that he was coming home with her." The idea of bringing someone home is one that generally brings to mind that sex will follow once the two arrive at home. "She imagined herself breathing heavily against him as



she smoothed his hair and grasped him round the waist to ease him into position” (7). The author further leads the reader to the idea that Isserley’s thoughts about the hitchhikers are sexual in nature when she checks out his genitals through his clothes and thinks: “The bulge in his jeans was promising, although most of it was probably testicles” (10).

In her low cut top, Isserley is dressed as if she wants to attract a man. She is attractive to the man, who seems focused on her perfect breasts. He notes her face is also pretty though she wears thick glasses.

The man does notice that there is something strange about Isserley. He notes how short she is and how strange her hands look. Even with her odd appearance, the hitchhiker admits to himself that he would sleep with her if he got the opportunity.

It becomes obvious that Isserley is not performing the average pick up job when her specially outfitted car injects a sedative into the hitchhiker. She also puts a disguise on the man before heading home with him. In fact, she seemed to get her fulfillment from dosing the man next to her with the drug, after she is done putting the wig on him and setting him straight in the car seat. These actions bring to mind her thoughts of “breathing heavily against him as she smoothed his hair and grasped him round the waist to ease him into position” (7). If this is what she had in mind for excitement, the reader wonders how the other sexual innuendos have been misinterpreted.

Isserley’s red Toyota Corolla is a symbol of the job she does and how seriously she takes it. The car is outfitted with special injectors in the passenger’s seat so that she can give the hitchhikers she finds desirable a dose of sedative. The car additionally has windows that darken when she pushes a button so she can disguise the hitchhiker while she drives back to her home. Isserley also has on hand in her car a variety of objects she can use to disguise the men she chooses as she drives them home.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the sexual innuendos presented in this first chapter of the novel. As the chapter closes do you think Isserley’s interest in the men she picks up is really sexual at all? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Talk about Isserley’s strange appearance. Why do you think the man is interested in her sexually even though he senses some oddity?

Discussion Question 3

What is your first impression of Isserley? What do you think she is doing when she picks up the men and then drugs them?



Vocabulary

appraise, nacreous, bitumen, piebald, placidly, pootle, monochrome, penal, perfunctory, conceding, surreptitiously, pronouncements, despondent, repugnant, desultory, languished, imminent, incongruous



Chapter 2

Summary

In Chapter 2, just as Isserley had given up on finding a suitable hitchhiker, she spotted a man whom she picked up. He noticed her breasts, as Isserley intended him to, and thought they were her only good feature. Her hands stood out to him as well and he liked the first man, wondered what she did for a living. Even though he first wondered what had happened to her and what sort of hell her life must have been, he also wondered what she could do for him. When Isserley realizes the man has a son with whom he is close, she lets him out of her car at his desired drop point.

The second hitchhiker had tattoos on his arms but Isserley thought to herself that those tattoos were only skin deep. When the man got in her car Isserley could smell alcohol. She sensed he was trouble. The man thought Isserley was ugly, but also decided that she wanted sex, based on the way she was dressed.

Even though Isserley wanted to turn on the icpathua switch, she made herself wait. She remembered once before when she had hit the switch too soon on one man. His wife and parents, as well as the police had looked for him for weeks. She had to change cars from the Nissan she liked so much because the investigation turned to the car. When the man asked Isserley if her breasts were real Isserley makes him get out of the car.

Isserley wondered if she should go back to the farm or if she felt emotionally well enough to try for another hitchhiker. She believed she was hiding her emotions in her physical problems like her eyestrain and backaches. Isserley had come to the conclusion that she was too emotional and she needed to go back home, she passed a hitchhiker she believed was suitable.

The man was surprised that Isserley had picked him up. Even though he noticed her breasts, he hoped she would make no sexual advances on him. He does notice the scars on her hands and wonders if she had surgery on her breasts as well. It was Isserley's eyes that really struck the man. He believed they were beautiful.

As they talk, Isserley learned the man was out traveling the world without his parents' knowledge. They believed he was in college in Germany. She shot him with the icpathua. When she arrived back at the farm, Ensel helped her unload the hitchhiker. He told her, as he always did, that this man was her best one yet.

Analysis

In this chapter the author adds information that helps change the reader's attitude toward what Isserley is doing. When Isserley picks up hitchhikers, she is also looking for people who either will not be missed or who are estranged from their family members. Even though it appeared in Chapter 1 that she was looking for men based on sexual



attraction, for sexual purposes, this idea is turned on its head at the end of this chapter when Isserley turns the man she has brought home over to the men at the farm and goes to her house to go to bed. The reader is at a loss as to why Isserley and the men at the farm are taking the men.

In order to kidnap her men, Isserley plays on the natural attraction between men and women. She wears a low-cut blouse that shows off her perfect breasts. Additionally, she shows off these breasts, which at least one man calls her best asset by the way she puts her hands on the steering wheel. All three of the men she picks up through the course of this chapter are attracted to Isserley and fantasize about a sexual encounter with her even though they agree that she is not that attractive any other way.

Isserley's odd appearance is of focus in this chapter. Although the third person narrator focuses on Isserley, the focus switches to the men she picks up to allow them to describe Isserley's strange appearance to the reader. Her hands are of particular interest. Two of the men notice how strange her hands look. One suspects that she messed them up in some sort of manual job. The other notices there are scars on her hands. Notice also the way Isserley's hands are described as she tries to put gas in her car. She describes her hand as a "narrow claw. It wasn't strength she lacked, it was sheer breadth of handspan. She needed two hands to guide the nozzle into the hole" (40).

Other distinctive characteristics of Isserley include the thick glasses that she wears as well as her unusual posture. She is unusually short. One of the men describes her as looking like she "had a rod up her arse" (30). This description will turn out to be ironically correct. Notice also that when Isserley gets out of her car to get gas, she feels a shock of pain when she stands up. One of the men suspects she has been in a car accident from which she got the injuries from which she obviously suffers.

Although Isserley uses her breasts to create interest in the men, notice how upset she gets when one of the men shows too much interest in them. She knows the men are attracted to her breasts; it is just a force of nature. She is offended enough that she kicks one hitchhiker out of her car when he asks if her breasts are real. Although Isserley pretends to be stoic and unaffected by the attention the men give her because of her physical qualities, it is obvious that this attention does upset her. The reader has to wonder why she continues to do what she does if it upsets her so much.

The language of the novel is appropriate for the country in which the story is set. In Scotland, gas for the car is called petrol, while a switch is referred to as a toggle. The men whom Isserley picks up are each given their own manner of speaking based on the dialect of the country. While Isserley speaks in proper English, one of the men speaks with a strong Scottish brogue. "Nearer tae it than you, Ah kin bet," (38) says the man when Isserley suggests he is not from that area. Notice that the first man she picks up uses fairly good English with no accent but that he cusses quite a bit, showing his roughness. The last man she pick up, however, speaks impeccably with the exception of the reference to his "pairends" (46).



The author uses a good deal of simile in her descriptions. For instance, she describes the head of the truant students, standing in the rain, looking “like a couple of peeled potatoes, each with a little splat of brown sauce on top” (25).

Notice also the author’s reference to one of the hitchhikers as a “biped” (27). This is a strange reference since it seems to be a distinguishing feature that separates Isserley from the hitchhiker. The reference is strange since Isserley is a biped, meaning she walks on two legs, as well. Notice also at the end of the chapter that the hitchhiker is referred to as a “vodsel” (50). This reference will be significant as the novel progresses.

The idea of aspects of the hitchhikers being “only skin deep” (28) are also important in this section. In one of these references Isserley wonders if it will matter that a man she has picked up has wrinkles. She thinks to herself “Did wrinkles matter? They shouldn’t: they were only skin deep, after all” (28). Another man has decorated himself with tattoos. Again Isserley thinks “skin deep, she reminded herself again” (35). The idea is that the outward appearance of the men does not really matter.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Isserley’s encounter with the man whom she eventually kicks out of her car. Why does he make her so uncomfortable?

Discussion Question 2

What do these interactions between Isserley and the hitchhikers say about relations between men and women? What do the men notice about Isserley? What is she looking for in them?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Isserley’s strange appearance. What do you think happened to her?

Vocabulary

truant, recede, reprobates, placards, deluge, derisively, miasma, deplorably, insular, ambiguity



Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, Isserley woke to sunshine the next morning even though she usually did not sleep well. She turned on the television in her room while she did the exercises intended to keep her from being as stiff and sore as she had allowed herself to become. She does not wear her glasses because they are not for vision purposes. As she exercises she wonders if she has not been doing the exercises as a way of punishing herself for what she had done.

Although she lived on a farm, all the fields are rented out to local farmers. They brought all the equipment needed at planting and harvest times so there was no farm equipment in sight. All the hitchhikers who ever spoke of Ablach farm believed it had been sold to a mad Scandinavian who intended to make money off it but instead let it fall into ruin.

A man named Esswis was the face of the farm. He seemed to be winning the respect of the community. Even though she and Esswis avoided each other, she and he were the only two who had been through the same thing.

Isserley walked to the largest farm buildings. It had been kept up because what it concealed had to be kept away from the eyes of the general public. She whispered her name into an intercom and a door was opened for her, allowing her entrance into this building. She was uncomfortable among the laborers with whom she ate in the common dining room. They were not the type of people she would have associated with back at home. They also looked different from her and she felt they stared at her strangeness. This morning they were unusually agitated because Amlis Vess, the son of the boss, was coming to Ablach Farm.

Back at her own home she built a fire and burned the hitchhiker's belongings. After she finished, she took a walk along the firth. On the beach she took the opportunity to take off her shoes. She figured if someone came she could hide her long toes by getting back to her shoes quickly or walking into the water. She thought how she was due the freedom because she was doing a job no one else could do and was doing a good job at that.

She believed she was crazy because she did apply for the job she now holds but also knew her choice was better than her option of being dumped in the New Estates, an underground workplace, for the rest of her life. She considered her life of being able to walk in the fresh air with what would have happened to her in the New Estates and considers what she allowed to be done to her a small sacrifice. All she had to do to stay out of the New Estates was walk on two legs. After a shower Isserley went for a drive even though she believed the chances of finding a suitable man were slim. She saw Esswis painting a fence as she drove out and spoke to him in their native language.



Analysis

A main theme in this novel is the warning that one should not take things at face value. There is often more going on “under the skin.” The farm on which Isserley lives is one example of a place that has more going on underneath the crust of the Earth than what appears on top. Isserley refers to a building that is an “entrance to a much larger secret just below the ground” (59). While the reader does not yet know exactly what is happening there it is certain that it is something that vodsls, as Isserley calls two legged people, would not approve.

Although the hitchhikers that she picks up accept her as one of them, there are more and more hints that Isserley has only been surgically manipulated to look like a vodsel. For instance, she has exceptional hearing and an unusual metabolism by vodsel standards. She also considers a choice she made that allowed her to do the job she is doing. She thinks that what happened to her is not worse than what would have happened if she had been sent to work in the New Estates. Note that in this section the reader also learns that Isserley’s glasses are not needed for purposes of correcting her vision, but instead as part of her disguise. Ironically, Isserley also notes that all she had to do to get her job on the farm was to be able to “when it came right down to essentials, was walk on two legs” (68). The reader must assume from this statement that at some point in her life Isserley was not able to walk on two legs.

At the same time she relishes the fresh air and beauty above ground, Isserley hates the changes that have been made to her body and the way that others look at her. For instance, she does not like to go eat with the workers in the cafeteria because she believes they are gawking at her. She imagines that they are fascinated by her breasts, which are surgical implants, as well as her face, which has been formed surgically. Because she looks so strange, yet has found some satisfaction in her life, Isserley is confused by the vodsls she picks up. Often the men who are most attractive also seem to be the most unhappy. “This inability of some of the most superbly fit and well-adapted vodsls to be happy while they were alive was, for Isserley, one of the great mysteries she encountered in her job, and one which her years of experience had only made more puzzling” (62).

Also important to notice in this section are the hints that Isserley gives that back home she was of a different class than the common laborers with whom she associates at the farm. “These labourers and process workers she would certainly never even have met in the course of ordinary life back home” (59). She had thought that her status, as well as her looks would keep her from being put to work but that did not happen. “Her hair had always been her best feature, back home. A member of the Elite had once told her that with hair like hers it was out of the question she could possibly be destined for the New Estates” (70-71). Despite this man’s promise, Isserley was given the choice to go to work on the farm or be sent to the New Estates, a place she did not want to go not only because she was claustrophobic but also because she knew people who were sent there aged quickly.



Notice also the suggestion that Isserley and Esswis are of a species different than vodsels because they speak a native language other than English. When Isserley greets Esswis in their native language she notices his hesitation in speaking the language out in the open. Language, its use and what the ability to communicate indicates means will be discussed further in the novel.

Isserley is different from the people with whom she works not only in her appearance but also in her spirituality. She is often confused about the vodels and their behavior but has no one with whom she can discuss her ideas. In fact, Isserley indicates that “she’d long ago discovered they lacked a spiritual side” (63). Interesting is that Isserley becomes agitated when she thinks about things of a spiritual nature too long. She has to calm herself by going to work.

Discussion Question 1

What does the reader learn about Isserley in Chapter 4 of the novel? How does it help to clear up her role on the farm? How is her role still unclear?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss socio economic status as it is presented in Chapter 3 of the novel. How does Isserley think her status would save her from the New Estates? What must she feel since she was given false promises by a man of the Elite?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way that human beings are referred to as vodsels in Chapter 3 of the novel. What do you think the term means?

Vocabulary

claustrophobic, diurnal, perverse, fatuous, taciturn, stoically



Chapter 4

Summary

In Chapter 4, as she was driving her car across a bridge in high wind, Isserley decided that she did not want to meet Amlis Vess. Even though she believed she was indispensable to her job and the farm, she had a feeling that Amlis' coming would bring bad things to her and the farm. She was most concerned he would not believe she was doing a good job. Isserley tried to convince herself Amlis' visit did not concern her because he did not even have a job with Vess Incorporated and his father thought he was a huge failure.

Even though she drove all day, Isserley did not find a hitchhiker suitable to be picked up but she had decided why she did not want to meet Amlis. She knew that when he saw her he would be shocked by her appearance. She did not want to see his shock. Instead of being hurt in this way she decided to hide out in her cottage until Amlis had come and gone.

On her way back to the farm, Isserley did spot a hitchhiker for whom she decided to stop. When he came to the car the hitchhiker told Isserley he was afraid his girlfriend would take her temper out on him because he was running late. The man, who appeared to be mentally handicapped, thought mostly about how his girlfriend would abuse him when he got home. He did think about Isserley briefly. He had noticed her breasts and her kind eyes. He thought she might make a good girlfriend.

The man spent most of the trip sleeping. Isserley struggled to get information out of him. It was when she learned that he had lung cancer that Isserley decided he probably was not the best choice. She dropped him off in Edderton, where his girlfriend lived. When he got out of the car he told Isserley that he hoped his girlfriend did not see her because she was beautiful.

After the man got out of her car Isserley took off her glasses and cried. She looked at herself in the rearview mirror and was able to see only her eyes, the small strip of her face that had not been surgically altered. She drove back to the farm. Ensel came out to greet her and told her not to worry about not having come back with a man that day since she had gotten such a big one the day before, "One of the best ever" (96) Ensel told her. Isserley wondered for a moment if the compliment was sincere before she killed that thought. Ensel asked if she wanted to be alerted when Amlis arrived. Isserley refused the suggestion, instead telling Ensel she had to go to bed. She realized as she drove away that she had given Ensel a glimpse into her life that she had not intended to give him.



Analysis

As the story progresses, it is more and more obvious that Isserley mourns for the beauty that was once hers. She finally comes to the conclusion that it is because she does not want to see his shock because of her appearance that she does not want to meet Amlis. She believes that she is ugly, at one point she describes herself as a “hideous animal” (79). Although it does not appear terribly significant here, the reference to Amlis expecting to see a human being when he looks at her is ironic since it appears that Isserley has been surgically manipulated to look like what the reader thinks a human being should look like.

After the hitchhiker’s unsolicited comment that Isserley is beautiful, Isserley seems particularly emotionally vulnerable. She considers the compliment given to her by Ensel, the man who greets her at the farm, and wonders if he is being sincere. It appears that she wonders if the compliments he gives her come from sympathy or a true appreciation of her.

Notice the comparison Isserley makes between Amlis Vess and the wind threatening to blow her car off course. In this analogy Isserley indicates she believes that Amlis’ visit is the forerunner of bad things for her. She feels as if his presence on the farm will change things for her. Just as she has to struggle to keep the wind from blowing her car off course, Isserley is afraid she will have to fight to keep Amlis from throwing her entire life off course.

Notice in this section the continued references to packaging. For instance, Isserley’s packaging has changed but she is still the same person inside. Another reference to packaging comes when the car that Isserley meets in Edderton blinks its lights at her. She indicates that this action is just that of “one vehicle saluting another of a vaguely similar shape and colour, in ignorance of the contents inside”

(94). Isserley seems to wonder if the people in the other car had really known what she was if they would have greeted her the way they did. It also speaks to the assumption that just because someone looks like we do, it does not mean that they are necessarily like us.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss why Isserley appears to be so upset about Amlis’ visit to the farm.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Isserley’s accidental reference to going to her bed when talking to Ensel. Why does this seem to make her so upset?



Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 4, Isserley picks up a hitchhiker who tells her that she is beautiful. Why do you think this comment upsets Isserley so badly?

Vocabulary

bitumen, paradoxically, indispensable, estranged, fortuitously, decrepit, annihilated, fixated, attenuated, oblivion, obsequious, placatingly, precipice, malodorous, miniscule, somnolent, dilettante, nominally, winsome



Chapter 5

Summary

In Chapter 5, Isserley was so worried that she would get woken up from bed by Amlis that she did not sleep well. When she did finally go to sleep she was woken by banging on the door. It was Esswis. She told him she was not interested in Amlis but he retorted she had better come with him because there were four vodsels loose. In the truck a few minutes later Isserley learned that Amlis had let the vodsels out. They go to the public road to search for the four monthlings that Esswis would have gone out with the shipment this month. Isserley knew that if anyone were to find these creatures it would be trouble for them.

On foot searching a field, Isserley found one of the creatures in the forrest. Unprotected, it was suffering with exposure to the cold. Because its tongue was amputated it could not speak. Its testicles had also been removed. Esswis shot it. Isserley thought to herself how Amlis had not helped the creature by letting it go. Two more vodsels are found in the cow pasture. They also are shot and loaded into Esswis' vehicle. As they drove the perimeter of the Ablach property one more time Isserley spotted the final vodsels. It was standing at a junction of the roads. Esswis did not stop at first; afraid he would be seen by another vehicle. Isserley convinced him it would be better to take the risk and get hold of the beast. Esswis was saved from shooting this vodsels because it got willingly into their car.

Back at the steading Esswis announced he was going home. Isserley, meanwhile, went to look for Amlis. She went to the massive steel drum that disguised the elevator. Isserley found Amlis in the men's quarters. Upon her first look at him she was shocked by how perfect he was. She described him standing on all fours with a tail and shimmering fur covering his body. Isserley was so shocked by the sight of him that she forgot to step out of the elevator until it was already headed down to a lower level. She pushed a button and returned to the floor where Amlis was. She was immediately resentful when he spoke to her.

Hoping to teach him his lesson, Isserley had Amlis come up to the ground level to look at the captured vodsels. She accused him of causing the vodsels to die because he had set them free. He defended his actions by telling her that he did not believe in killing animals. Isserley showed him the places where the vodsels were frostbit and explained they would have died of exposure. Amlis suggested she was not really angry because he had caused the vodsels to come to harm since she and the workers planned to kill them anyway. Isserley did not have an answer for him but instead told the other workers to keep him from getting into further trouble until he could be sent back home.



Analysis

When Isserley comes face-to-face with Amlis the reader understands what types of surgery she must have undergone in order to look like what is called in this novel a vodsels. Human beings are instead furred creatures who walk on all fours. The references to vodsels and human beings go against the reader's assumptions about humans and creatures. Isserley believes she stopped being human and became some sort of creature "a denuded freak, the gargoyle girl" (99) when she was made to look more like a vodsels.

While Isserley had been afraid that Amlis would cause trouble at the farm, she had no idea the type of trouble he would cause. Believing that he is making a statement about the poor treatment the vodsels are getting, Amlis lets four of them go free. Isserley is angry because if it had been discovered what was happening to the hitchhikers at the farm, the entire operation could be shut down and she would be out of a job. She is also angry because the condition in which the vodsels are at the point where Amlis sets them free, they are in no shape to survive. Not only have their tongues and genitals been removed, they also have been fed a special diet that has caused them to gain a good deal of weight. They are unable to move properly and have even begun to suffer with frostbite by the time Isserley and Esswis find them.

Of all the cruelties done to the vodsels, one deals directly with language. At some point in their captivity, the humans cut out their tongues. This removal of the tongue is an intentional act to keep the animals from speaking. While they cannot talk, the vodsels obviously have not lost their memory of Isserley or what she did to them. Even though he is not able to hoist the clod of dirt very far, it is significant that one of the vodsels attempts to throw a clod of dirt at Isserley, a sign of dislike and perhaps even an attempt to keep Isserley away from him.

Ironically, Amlis let the vodsels go because he believes it is wrong to kill animals. Isserley makes the point to him that they would have died anyway out in the cold.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it so important for Isserley and Esswis to locate the vodsels that Amlis set free?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Isserley's reaction when she first sees Amlis.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think that Yns tells Amlis that he thinks Isserley likes Amlis at the end of Chapter 5?

Vocabulary

farrago, regime, desultory, ululating, impasse, sentience, ineradicable



Chapter 6

Summary

In Chapter 6, feeling tired, Isserley pulled off the A9 just to rest her eyes. Instead she went to sleep. She dreamed she had been sent to work in the Estates and woke herself screaming. Knowing she would not be able to sleep again for a while she went back to work. The first hitchhiker she found said he had tickets to a John Martyn concert. As they drove, the man, who had introduced himself as Dave, thought that he would not mind spending time with Isserley. He liked her big eyes and big breasts. Isserley, meanwhile learned he would be staying with his mother once he got to Glasgow and knew he was not a good choice. She let him out at Pitlochry as she promised.

When it began to get dark Isserley wondered where she should spend the night. She did not want to go back to the farm. As Isserley grew lost in thought she momentarily let the car drift to the other lane. Another vehicle passed close enough to shear off her drivers' side mirror. Frightened by the experience, Isserley pulled her car off the road. She believed it was Amlis' fault for upsetting her so badly by visiting the farm that she let her attention stray from her driving.

Heading home Isserley stopped for gas. She had not had anything to eat that day so she looked over the selection of snacks and found some potato crisps she believed would be safe for her to eat.

Not far from the farm Isserley spotted a hitchhiker. This man, who said he had just left a job interview, was not impressed with Isserley's breasts. He was also frustrated because she drove so slowly. As he rode he thought of all the things that he had lost since his job as a dog breeder had gone so badly. When she learned how badly his life was going and how he was living alone, she used the icpathua on him. Back at the farm, Ensel was upset when he ran to her car as usual and Isserley lashed out at him. He was hurt as he took the vodsel into the building. Isserley began crying again.

Analysis

Isserley's stress begins to grow in this section of the novel. The incident that scares her to most is when she almost has a wreck on the A9. She had stopped paying attention for just long enough to veer into the incoming lane of traffic. Her lack of attention is probably because of a lack of sleep. But when she tried to nap she woke shortly after going to sleep because of a bad dream about being in the New Estates. Isserley blames all of her problems on Amlis. It is his fault she has not gotten enough sleep and is now drowsy and unable to pay attention on her job. She also believes it is his fault that she is so distracted.

Although she had mentioned to a hitchhiker before that he needed to put on his seatbelt so they would not get stopped by the police, it is in this section that Isserley shows that



she has a real fear of the police. “There were quite a few things police might ask to see which she didn’t have — including a pair of vodselsized eyes behind those big thick glasses of hers” (125). Isserley tries not to do anything out of the ordinary to keep from being noticed by the police. She knows that if they were to stop her, they would recognize right away that there was something not right about her.

Like some of the men before him, the one who introduces himself as Dave also judges Isserley based on her appearance. Again it is her breasts that get his attention though he does also think her eyes are pretty. He believes she is unlike the other girls he has met because she did stop to pick him up even though he is a big man. He makes the point that women generally stay away from men when picking up hitchhikers. Dave shows he is typical male when he considers mentioning to Isserley that he knows about bad hair days. He wants to impress her with his knowledge of women and women’s issues only because he hopes it might get him sex. “Women liked to think there wasn’t a hopeless divide between the sexes; it was a real leg-opener, he’d found” (130). Notice the way the author changes the familiar phrase a real eye-opener to “a real leg-opener” indicating that he believes he knows females well enough to know what will make them more likely to offer him sex.

Notice the personification: “A belligerent sun was staring her right in the eyes” (125).

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the interaction between Dave and Isserley. What role does music play in their discussion? Why do you think Isserley considers getting a John Martyn tape after she lets Dave out?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Isserley starts crying again after she is hateful to Ensel?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Isserley blame all of the problems she faces on this particular day on Amlis? What do you think her willingness to blame him indicates?

Vocabulary

homilies, pulverulent, bauxite, audacious, jovial, melismatic, sabotage, deranged, periphery, curtailed



Chapter 7

Summary

In Chapter 7, Isserley was disoriented when she woke. She did not even know what time it was because her clock was flashing zero. As she lay there she realized she had allowed her life to veer out of control. She decided it was time to bring things back to normal. She turned on the television, hoping it would give her enough light to do her exercises. Although the television was the means through which Isserley had learned the English language it depressed her with its images of female suppression. She turned off the television and decided to go to the beach where she would finish her exercises. In the shower she discovered herself feeling for her genitalia and forced herself to stop.

Her trip to the firth and the completion of her exercises put Isserley in a better mood. Back in her cottage, she became depressed again. She thought of how she should ask the men to put electric wiring in her cottage. Isserley could not remember the details of her first days at Ablach Farm or how she had come to live in the cottage. She does remember how the men seemed both fascinated with her and pitied her. They had tried to impress her with the offers of help but she had told the men that she did not want anything from them. In fact, she told the men she wanted them to leave her alone.

As Isserley cleaned out and did routine maintenance on her car she tried to decide if she wanted to go eat with the men in the dining hall or try her luck with vodsel food. She made up her mind to go to the dining hall. There, Hilis showed her the roasted meat he was about to serve. He even shaved her off a slice. As she put it in her mouth she heard Amlis say behind her that she did not know what she was doing. She asked what his problem was and he told her the meat she was eating had come off a living, breathing creature. She told him she doubted there was anything similar between her and her breakfast but he responded by telling her "We're all the same under the skin" (176).

Isserley attacked Amlis by indicating he did nothing to earn his own way, he changed the subject and asked her to go with him to the vodsel pens. She did not want to go because she was so scared of being below ground but he begged her, telling her that he had a question that he needed answered. Isserley went with him but audibly moaned as the elevator took them further and further below ground.

Analysis

The images Isserley sees on the television in Chapter 7 of the novel are symbolic of the oppression of females in the vodsel world. One of the first images is the women in white burkas advancing down the street, marching, it is assumed for their rights. The television announcer wonders how far the women will be allowed to go. Another image describes women as being weak and unable to take care of themselves. In this program



a woman is saved from an enemy by a man who criticizes her for not doing as she was told. Isserley believes she is different from these women. Although the men at Ablach Farm had tried to make her their pet by promising to make her life as comfortable as possible, Isserley had refused their help. She had instead asked to be left alone and be allowed to have her privacy. Her pride had kept her from having some of the comforts she might have enjoyed, like electricity in the cottage instead of just one electrical outlet that worked.

Isserley prides herself on not bowing to her needs. When her fingers begin trying to locate her genitals during her shower, she quickly becomes businesslike again, ignoring her sexual needs. Isserley also struggles with her need for food. Her pride keeps her from going to the dining hall where she might run into Amlis. This need, however, wins out and she goes in search of something to eat. When she wakes thirsty but finds the glass she kept next to her bed has no water in it, she tells herself that she “was strong. Needs could not bully her” (153).

Isserley bears a chip on her shoulder from her previous interactions with her kind. She seems to prefer to steer clear of them. For instance, notice how she describes how the men at Ablach Farms acted when she first arrived. “Ogling her in fascinated pity, they had ganged up to douche her with reassurance” (163).

This sentence is full of words that offer conflicting connotations. “Ogling” is a word to describe a manner of looking at something with sex on one’s mind. Meanwhile “fascinated pity” is almost an oxymoron, two words that describe opposite intentions or emotions. The idea the men “ganged up” on Isserley gives their actions a negative connotation, almost as if they were trying to hurt her instead of helping her. Finally, the connotation that the men “douche her with reassurance” is a suggestion they were too powerful and over the top in their attempts to make her feel better.

Adding to the chip on Isserley’s shoulder is her memory of how she was betrayed once before by members of the elite. Although she had been promised she would not be put to work in the New Estates, she wound up there anyway. When she faces Amlis she makes herself remember how she was treated by the elite. “Deliberately, she recalled being petted and then discarded by the Elite; she pictured the authorities who’d decided she would be more suited to a life in the Estates, men with accents just like Amlis Vess’s” (175). She hates Amlis not because of anything he has done to her, but what his kind had done to her. All in all, Isserley believes she has been “exploited, used like a piece of brute equipment” (162) by the elite and the working class as well.

Isserley goes, albeit unwillingly, with Amlis when he asks her to answer a question for him. She is afraid of being underground, not of the area of the pens. He is crusading against the killing of animals for meat and catches her just as she is trying a piece of vodsels meat that Hilis has prepared. He suggests there is not much difference between she and the man whose meat she is not eating. His idea is that people are the same “under the skin” the inspiration for the title of the novel. Notice how cleverly the author acknowledges how uncomfortable Isserley feels when Amlis chides her for eating the meat. “She almost choked on her reply; perhaps it was a tiny thread of meat lodged in



her throat” (176). The suggestion that Isserley almost choked on the piece of meat that Amlis indicated was wrong for her to be eating in the first place shows that she does feel that his view of not eating meat has some merits.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the way that males and females are presented in Chapter 7 of the novel. Which is seen as the weaker sex? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Isserley is so determined to ignore her needs? What does this say about her?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think the author is making a statement about eating meat in general in Chapter 7 of the novel? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

sibilant, indefatigably, copious, fetid, derelict, rotund, indigenous, perfunctorily, surreal, lithe



Chapter 8

Summary

In Chapter 8, Isserley found herself in a nightmare come true when they reached the bottom level of the building. Amlis thought it was a nightmare too, but for different reasons. Isserley had been to the vodsel pens before but then there had been no animals there. She was surprised because the area was more crowded and dirtier than she remembered. Three new arrivals gestured and tried to talk to Amlis. He ran to them. One of the men lunged at Isserley through the wire cage but was unable to break through. Another of the vodsels wound together a bundle of straw and wrote the word “mercy” in the dirt. Amlis said his father had always described the creatures as being “vegetables on legs” (183) he believed the scratching was a sign that the creatures had their own language. Amlis asked Isserley what the word meant and Isserley realized there was no word in their language that properly translated the word.

Isserley was careful in her answer, not wanting to encourage Amlis’ pity for the creatures or have him make a fuss. When she did give a vague answer, Amlis told her that he was only trying to get her to see that the creatures they saw as animals and ate as a delicacy were trying to communicate with them. When Isserley stressed to him that she did not know what the vodsels were trying to communicate because she was a human being, not a vodsel, he looked at her and seemed to see her for the first time. He then apologized.

Back in her car Isserley thought of the ways that vodsels were unlike human beings even though some of their actions could be interpreted to be human-like. She was glad that Amlis would be leaving soon and that he would become someone else’s problem.

Isserley changed her focus when she saw a huge hitchhiker up ahead. He was wearing reflective work coveralls. She passed him twice before stopping to pick him up, which was her technique, but she felt some misgivings about the man. When he got into the car, he seemed embarrassed but was thinking to himself that he had gotten lucky. He even said it out loud before complimenting Isserley on her breasts. The man next asked Isserley if she liked sex. He continued to talk about breasts and the way he liked her body better than those of supermodels when Isserley told him she had reached the spot where she intended to put him out. He pulled a knife on her and ordered her to take him a little further.

With the knife digging into her side the man ordered her to pull the car into a deserted area. She tried to shoot him with a sedating dose of icpathua but the coveralls he was wearing would not let the needles penetrate it. She knew she could not get away because the surgery she had would no longer allow her to run. He pulled her outside the car and took off her shirt. After he rubbed her breasts for some time he ordered her down on her knees so she could give him oral sex. When he was satisfied he told her to stop and made her bend over the hood of her car, trying to rape her. Despite her



deformities, he went about his business. She tried to cry out the word the vodsels had scratched in the ground but she did not know how to properly pronounce it so it came out “murky” (199).

Isserley managed to trick the man by telling him that she could show him where her genitals were. She pulled apart her buttocks and he concentrated on looking for a point of entry. While he was absorbed she flung her arms upward and dredged out the hitchhiker’s eyes. She dressed and got in the car to leave but realized she had lost one of her fingernails. She went back for it, not wanting to leave any evidence behind.

Analysis

This is the climax of the novel. Isserley has, so to speak, gotten a taste of her own medicine. She has had a hitchhiker take advantage of her and do cruel things to her without her permission. This experience comes just after Amlis talked to Isserley about the possibility that the vodsels had their own language and were perhaps intelligent creatures. The rape leaves Isserley feeling more used and exploited than ever. Notice that she tries to cry out for mercy from the man, the same mercy that the vodsels asked from her and Amlis earlier. Just like Isserley did not give the men mercy, the man who rapes Isserley does not give her any mercy either. There is foreshadowing that Isserley’s encounter with the man will not go well. She reports feeling a sense of misgiving before she allows him to get into her car.

Language as a criterion that indicates intelligence is discussed in this section. Amlis believes that since the vodsels try to communicate with him through marks on the floor, that they are beings who do not deserve to be killed and eaten. Notice how much trouble Isserley has in answering his question in a way that does not encourage his idea that vodsels are intelligent. “For her to speak the word at all dignified it with the status of being a word in the first place” (184) Isserley thinks when she wonders whether it would be a good idea to pretend to be trying to pronounce the word. Isserley realizes that by not acknowledging the word, she is lying to him about the abilities of the vodsels. “She would be dignifying the vodsels, in his eyes, with both writing and speech. But is it not true, she asked herself, that they have that dignity?” (184). This idea makes Isserley think that Amlis is actually correct in believing that the vodsels are intelligent.

Notice the way words are chosen to sculpt the ideas the author presents. In their pens, the vodsels are described as livestock or cattle. The human beings in this novel eat the vodsels just like in our world we eat the meat of cows. The author also uses a variety of literary techniques to describe things. For instance, the man wearing the yellow coveralls is described in a metaphor as “an experimental traffic fixture” (187). In a simile, the way the light enters the room in which the vodsels are kept is described as filling “the compound from floor to ceiling, like a tide of seawater into a crevice” (179).

A final quote of interest brings to mind the sexual innuendo seen earlier in the novel. When Isserley considers telling the man she will take him as far as Evanton, she was afraid he would be “annoyed to be taken for such a short ride” (192). In this idea



Isserley is afraid the man will be angry with her for only taking him a short distance. In reality, it is she who is being deceived by his intentions.

Discussion Question 1

When Amlis asks Isserley what the word the vodsels scratched in the dirt means, she realizes there is no translation for it in their language, because the concept does not exist. What would a world be like where mercy does not exist?

Discussion Question 2

How is Isserley's experience with the man who tries to rape her similar to what she does to the men whom she lures into her car on a daily basis?

Discussion Question 3

When Isserley tells Amlis she cannot interpret what the vodsels are trying to tell them because she is a human being, not a vodsels, he looks her up and down and then apologizes. For what do you think he is apologizing?

Vocabulary

averted, ambience, torpidly, projectile, anthropomorphize, posthumous, nubile, culled, disembodied, improvise



Chapter 9

Summary

In Chapter 9, Isserley drove to a jetty and parked her car. She felt nothing. After two hours she noticed the tide had risen and wondered if it would eventually wash her car away. She thought she should start her car and drive away but simply did not have the spirit left to make a decision. She felt as if there was some idea or emotion that she could not quite grasp. Isserley sat there in her car all night. She continued to sit there as the sun rose. She did not want to leave until she was ready. At last, she moved, testing the icpathua injectors. They worked flawlessly. She finally began to cry weakly.

Analysis

Isserley appears to be in shock as she sits in her car all night and most of the following morning. She cannot come to terms with what has just happened to her. In her desperation, she tests the icpathua injectors, the things she had counted on to keep her safe to see that they do work.

Notice the way that the author personifies the sea. "Sometime during these dark hours, the sea gave up trying to intimidate her, and slunk away" (204). The sea, like everything else in Isserley's life appears to be trying to work away at her self-confidence and bring her down.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way the clouds change as the winds make them into new shapes and designs. Why is this image significant to Isserley's mindset?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it her testing of the icpathua jets that causes Isserley to begin crying?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Isserley's inability to think or even move as she sits in her car. Why is this time in her car significant? Does she ever come to any decision about her condition during this time? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

stylized, jetty, eluding, diffuse, abstract



Chapter 10

Summary

In Chapter 10, Isserley spotted a hitchhiker but he was too puny for her needs. Her car began to rattle again. She decided she would fix it after she finished working. She did pick up a man with curly red hair. When he came up to her car, however, Isserley discovered she was unable to speak. The hitchhiker seemed uncomfortable because she did not talk to him. He tried to think of things to say to her but could come up with nothing. When he looked at her closely he noticed she seemed to be in distress with mud on her pants and the smell of sweat and seawater coming off her. He wished he knew her story, sure that it was an inspirational one as he looked at the scars that covered her body. He considered talking to her about his partner, but decided it was not something he could just bring up.

Meanwhile, Isserley felt the pressure to communicate with the man. Suddenly she realized she did not have the energy to play the game that her job required of her. Even though she never even spoke to him she said one word in her native language and then injected him with the icpathua. She did not have the adrenaline rush she generally did when she chose to inject a vodsel. As she prepared to dress this vodsel for his drive to the farm, she noticed two tears fall from her eyes.

On the way back home Isserley felt she knew what she needed to do in order to get herself feeling normal again. She was surprised when Ensel came out and asked if she was okay instead of showing interest first in the man she had with her. When the men loaded the vodsel up, Isserley went with them. The men seemed to agree that she did not need to see what they were about to do but she insisted. She watched as they amputated his tongue and then castrated him. Isserley was surprised that the ordeal was finished so quickly with so little fuss. Because the ordeal was over so quickly Isserley did not get the emotional release she had hoped for.

Under Isserley's instruction the butcher brought up a monthling to process. She wanted to see what happened at that stage. Isserley tried to recognize this particular vodsel even though he looked no different from all the others. Unser electrocuted the vodsel and then slit its throat. When she saw the blood Isserley cried out in relief. At the sound of her voice all the men stopped to look at her. Before he would continue, Unser asked Isserley to leave. She refused and the men surrounded her. They grabbed at her with their hands as she lost consciousness.

Analysis

Although she is not yet aware of the mistake she has made, Isserley chooses to sedate a vodsel with a girlfriend with whom he is very close. Because he has a close relative, it means that there will be someone who will be worried when he does not come home



and will question his disappearance. In her distress after her rape, Isserley has put the entire production at Ablach Farms at risk.

As William struggles to try to find some way to start a conversation with Isserley, notice the dynamics of the relationship between males and females. First, he makes the assumption about Isserley that she is not interested in the beauties of nature. This is one of his first mistakes since nature is one of the things that Isserley does enjoy, particularly the sea. William does correctly surmise that there is something wrong with Isserley though he cannot think of a polite, unsexual way to ask what has happened to her. He worries that whatever he says to her might be taken as a sexual comment and might be seen as offensive. He thinks that if he were a doctor he could perhaps seem innocent when he comments on the bloodstain on the side of her shirt. In the end, he says nothing to her, erring on the side of being too cautious.

When it comes to Isserley's desire to watch the processing of the vodsels it appears she wants to have some sort of assurance that the vodsels suffer in some way. She seems disappointed when she sees how easy and painfree the process actually is. Isserley told by Unser, the man in charge of processing the vodsels, that, "we don't want to cause unnecessary suffering, do we?" (226). She has to be thinking about how much she has suffered in order to take the job. By watching the processing, Isserley seems to be looking for some proof that the vodsels are suffering, like she has.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Isserley suddenly decides that she wanted to see how the vodsels are processed? Why does she get so excited by the blood?

Discussion Question 2

Consider how William tries to find a way to start a conversation with Isserley. Why do you think she is unable to speak to him?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the men's reaction when Isserley cries out when she finally sees the vodsels' blood. Why do they make her stop watching at this point?

Vocabulary

ruminated, cretinously, fathom, platitude, panache, deign, physiognomy



Chapter 11

Summary

In Chapter 11, when Isserley woke she was laying on the deck of the transport ship. Amlis was sitting next to her. He said he had persuaded the men that fresh air would be good for her. He told her he had been watching the sky and had been unprepared for its beauty. Isserley understood his enthusiasm and snorted with pain and laughter when she finally managed to lift her arms enough to clasp them on her belly. Amlis moved closer to her and she asked what he was eating. She was angered when he said he was not eating anything. He clarified and said he was chewing icpathua. Isserley began laughing when Amlis talked about swallowing a bale of the stuff in order for it to kill him. Her laughter stopped when he told her that Icpathua was a good painkiller. She denied she was in pain. Even though he pleasantly surprised her by calling her by name, Isserley believed she needed to get rid of him so she could do her exercises.

Isserley learned from Amlis that he did not have his father's blessings to come to the farm. He had wanted to make up his own mind about the business and decided it was based on cruelty. Isserley told him he did not know what cruelty really was. He should visit the New Estates or even work there. He pointed out to her that she had come to the farm to escape the New Estates. He was just like she was in her desire to avoid harsh conditions.

When Isserley suggested he had an easy life he told her that not all damage was obvious. Getting closer to her, Amlis told her that he knew what had been done to her. He could not imagine how she thought about that. He indicated that he was most interested in what was inside her, her inner person. She was angry when she told him that it was her kind who had sent her to the Estates. In her anger she tried to turn away but wrenched her spine so painfully she cried out because of it. He helped her to sit up and then offered her a piece of icpathua plant. She tried to refuse the drugs but then accepted the sprig he offered.

Later, Isserley felt better and less inhibited. She did her exercises in front of Amlis while he talked. She was surprised when he told her how much the voddisson that they prepared at the farm cost. He shared with her that scientists were trying to find a way to grow the meat in a laboratory. Ensel came out to check on Isserley. After he left, Amlis told Isserley that Ensel really did care about her. Changing the subject, Amlis asked Isserley to take him out to see the sea and the trees. He promised to behave himself and she finally agreed. He was impressed and awed by all that he saw around him. She realized that even though she had paid a high price, she was lucky because she got to live in nature and beauty all the time.

Isserley was shocked when Amlis suggested that the sheep they saw could be used for food. She pointed out to him how much the sheep looked like they did, criteria that she believed made them ineligible as food. He pointed out they were already eating the



flesh of animals, why not try another? As they continued talking he pointed out to her that the men who worked at the farm said she was not acting like herself and were worried about her. He wanted to know if anything had happened. She told him only that she had a hard job. When he asked why she did not quit, she was surprised to learn there were other people willing to take her job over. He indicated they would be willing to do what she had done so they could enjoy nature as she got to do. As he looked at her, Amlis decided Isserley was beautiful in a strange way.

After a while it began to snow. Isserley was amused because she sensed that Amlis was afraid. Once he understood they were not in any danger he declared the falling snow a miracle. She told him it would be even more beautiful in the sunlight but he let her know that he would be gone by morning. He was going back with the transport ship. He told her he needed to get back because it would be easy for him to get seduced by the world above ground. He laid his hand on her arm as he told her this.

Amlis told Isserley to take care of herself when she let him out of the car at the steading. He advised her to listen to the voice inside her. She answered in a smart aleck way but was crying as she watched him go. He promised to come back sometime. At her home Isserley had a note from Esswis which she did not even try to read. She stayed awake and listened until she heard the transport ship launch.

Analysis

The idea that not all damage and unhappiness can be seen externally is presented in Chapter 11 of the novel. While Isserley's damage is obvious when one looks at her mutilated body, Amlis' is not visible to the naked eye. He knows that Isserley believes that because he is a member of the elite and will not be threatened with having to work in the New Estates that his life is perfect. Amlis explains to her that this is not the case. He also helps her to appreciate, from a fresh point of view, the beauty that she is able to see every day. While living underground, even as an elite, he has never experienced rain or snow, never seen the trees and never seen the sea.

During their conversation Amlis also makes the point to Isserley that despite what she looks like on the outside, she is the same type of creature he is on the inside. "Do you think nobody is capable of noticing you're a human being underneath?" (243) he asks her. Although he does not tell Isserley, Amlis thinks to himself that she is beautiful in her own strange way.

Although Isserley claims to see nothing wrong with killing the vodsels and eating them for meat, she is shocked when Amlis suggests that they could use the sheep he sees for this same purpose. Isserley likes the sheep and noted that the young even look like young human beings. She connects with them. For this reason she tries to explain to Amlis why she thinks it would not be ethical to eat them. "They're . . . they're on all fours, Amlis, can't you see that? They've got fur — tails — facial features not that different from ours . ." (253). While Amlis believed vodsels should not be eaten because



they had their own language and communication, Isserley argues the sheep should not be eaten because of their packaging, because they look like human beings.

Before she meets with Amlis, Isserley thinks that she is indispensable, but Amlis shocks her by telling her that there are other people who would be willing to do what she has done in order to have the exposure to nature that she has. When he notices how badly his statement has upset her, “Amlis went quiet for a moment, as he tried to find his way safely through what had opened up between them: the jagged traps of her grief” (255).

Discussion Question 1

Why does Isserley find the idea of eating sheep revolting? Why do you think Amlis really suggests it?

Discussion Question 2

In what way do Amlis and Isserley bond during Chapter 11? In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Amlis' use of icpathua as a recreational drug. Why is Isserley so against the drug at first? Why does she agree to take it?

Vocabulary

aperture, conceded, insouciantly, antagonism, languorously, cosseted, sanctimonious, gyrated, fecundity, tenebrous, cynical



Chapter 12

Summary

In Chapter 12, as Isserley bathed she thought how everything in her life was finally back to normal now that Amlis had gone back home. She wished Amlis had seen her as she had once been while she shaved the fur off that was beginning to grow back. She believed that since Amlis was gone there was no reason for her not to go back to work.

On the news Isserley saw pictures of the hitchhiker she had picked up the day before. There was search on for the man, named William Cameron. The police believed his disappearance may be connected to the murder of Anthony Mallinder, the man who tried to rape Isserley.

Isserley tried to distract herself from her belief that she had messed up when she took William by looking through her clothing. She remembered the note from Esswis when she headed out of the house. It contained a message he was passing along from Vess Industries asking Isserley to increase production. They were considering sending someone to help her.

When she went to eat with the men in the dining hall, Isserley saw them for what they were. She understood that they were just pieces of machinery that were being overused. As Ensel talked to her about rumors that Vess Incorporated wanted bigger shipments, Isserley realized Ensel was at least trying to eat right. She commented she was sure that the bosses wished all of them would work harder. In the silence that followed Isserley thought to herself again that she should not have taken the red headed man.

As she began thinking she decided that Hilis was to blame for what had happened because he had lured her into the kitchen with him, setting her up to be seen by Amlis. She continued to think about Hilis and Unser's position and wondered if they were considered elites in the farm's society; if they got fed better food in better quarters than the others.

During her work that day Isserley picked up a hitchhiker who thought to himself that Isserley was the one who was to be pitied because she had picked him up. He unloaded on her about how he lived in a van with his dog. He was also freshly divorced. He seemed completely uninspired by his life and his job. The only thing he had to go home to was his dog. Despite his own pain, he recognized that Isserley was suffering as well. He commiserated with her, telling her "Life is shit, you know that?" (283). When she began to cry he offered to get out of the car. When Isserley turned to look at him she saw herself reflected in his eyes. She apologized to him before she injected him with the icpathua. When he passed out, she noticed that he looked peaceful.



Back at the farm, Isserley became upset again when Ensel made his comment this vodsels was “One of the best ever” (285). Isserley began to tell Ensel the vodsels was not the best or the worst, he was just a vodsels but she stopped herself before she spoke the word vodsels. A little while later Isserley finally read the entire note that Ensel had left for her. They wanted her to trap a female vodsels for them.

Analysis

Isserley finds it more and more difficult to kill the vodsels because she is beginning to connect with them emotionally. She particularly understands the disgruntled businessman whom she picks up in this chapter. His job is not going well, he has lost his wife, and he feels that life is no longer worth living. There are many of the same problems that Isserley struggles with. She is questioning if her job is worth the stress and danger, in just a few days’ time she has gone from despising Amlis to liking him deeply, but he has left her. She’s also learned how easily it would be to replace her. Suddenly, Isserley does not feel as unique or as needed. She realizes that to Vess Incorporated that she is just a piece of machinery that can be replaced or discarded if they find a cheaper way to produce the meat they sell. Adding insult to injury, they ask her to capture them a female vodsels, a move that will help them learn how to manufacture vodsels in a factory, cutting out the need for her job. As she thinks about how expendable she is, she realizes that she has this in common with the men who work in the processing plant. Although she had always thought she was above them because of her sacrifice she realizes that she, like they, are “like over-used pieces of equipment, like tools bought cheap for a job that would outlast them” (269).

Notice the last quote in the previous paragraph is a simile. The author uses a variety of similes in his descriptions in the remainder of this story. The cobwebs in Isserley’s bathroom, for instance, look “like wisps of sheepswool caught on a barbed-wire fence” (261) while her bathwater after she shaves off her regrowing fur is “like a pond stagnant with brown algae” (264).

Just when Isserley believes she is ready to dedicate herself to her job again she learns that William Cameron, the man she had brought to the farm but had never talked to, had been listed as a missing person. Isserley feels this means that her job is over. It is a premonition that Isserley will soon decide to part ways with Ablach Farm, just like Amlis suggested that she do.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Isserley and the hitchhiker that she picks up in Chapter 12. How are their views on life similar? How are they different?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the meaning of Vess Incorporated's request that Isserley send them a female vodsel.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think that Isserley apologizes again and again to the vodsel who she picks up in Chapter 12?

Vocabulary

opulent, putrefaction, orifices, implement, enunciation, desolate



Chapter 13

Summary

In Chapter 13, Isserley paced her cottage trying to put together a plan. She had a nightmare in which she saw herself as the vodsel's dog, trapped in the van. When burning the clothes of the last vodsel she brought in, Isserley saw a photograph of the man and his wife. Because the photo had the words Pennington Studio written on it Isserley assumed that was the man's name. She considered setting him free but decided since his tongue had already been amputated and he had been castrated, he probably would not want to live anyway. Motivated by her dream, Isserley found Pennington's van and set his dog free.

After Isserley left the van and the dog, she decided that she wanted to let her instinct decide where she would go from there. Even though she put her fingers over the turn signal switch on her car, they did not move to press the switch when she passed the turn off the Ablach Farm. She believed her decision had been made for her. As she headed toward Dornoch Bridge, she had a premonition and looked across the bridge to see police stopping vehicles there. She made a U-turn on the bridge.

As she drove, wondering where she should go, she remembered Amlis' words to her that the world was very beautiful as he put his hand on her arm. She wondered if he thought she was beautiful as well but decided that he did not.

Isserley spent three days living in her car near a loch. She decided she had to go find something substantial to eat. She drove to a gas station and chose a chicken roll wrapped in white paper. Less than an hour later Isserley was throwing up because of the unfamiliar food. She refused to be frustrated, knowing she would be able to find food that her digestive system would accept.

As she drove back to the loch where she had been hiding out, a vodsel jumped in front of her car, demanding a ride. He told her that his girlfriend was having a baby and that he was five miles from the hospital. Isserley agreed unwillingly. On the way to the hospital the man talked about how happy he was about his baby. He believed that it indicated he would be immortal. He also spoke of his ideas of death and told Isserley that he believed in reincarnation, coming back as something else after one's death.

As Isserley drove, her car began to rattle again. She lost control of the car on ice and the wheel refused to turn even though the man tried to help her. The car ran headfirst into a tree. The man was thrown out through the windshield. Isserley was badly hurt. A woman stopped to help and told Isserley she would go call an ambulance. After she left, Isserley talked herself into pushing the button that would cause her car to explode. She thought that she would come back as a part of the universe and the beauty that is the universe.



Analysis

It is in chapter 13 that Isserley seems to become a compassionate person. She lets Pennington's dog go free. She considers freeing Pennington but is afraid that because he has already been castrated and had his tongue cut out he will be even less happy with life than he was before those things happened to him. Isserley, however, is still not easy on herself. When she thinks about Amlis' quote about the beauty of the world and how easy it might be to get seduced by that beauty she tells herself that he was not referring to her as being attractive. The reader knows that Amlis was attracted to Isserley but she cannot bring herself to believe that he would be attracted to her.

Isserley's death at the end of the novel is probably the best end that she could have met. Notice all of the problems she has encountered just in the three days that she has been away from Ablach Farm. She has to avoid the police because she does not have the proper license and permits to drive. She also has no place to live. Sleeping in the backseat of her car has been less than ideal because it is not long enough for her to stretch out on properly. The first kind of vodsels food she tries to eat makes her sick.

When Isserley goes to a gas station to get food the choices she has are all covered in white paper. She cannot choose her food based on what it looks like. This adds to the idea that even though things may look alike on the outside, they may be very different on the inside.

Since Isserley most missed her beauty it is fitting that she considers that her death has the ability to turn her into something beautiful. "Instead of ending up buried in the ground, she would become part of the sky: that was the way to look at it" (310). She sees herself becoming part of the rain, the snow and the mists. Appropriately as well, Isserley's fake breasts, the appendages she hated so much, appear to have burst as a result of her wreck.

Discussion Question 1

"Of all the phases of sleep to be woken from, this was the worst" (287). The narrator frequently makes references to Isserley's sleep cycle. Why do you think this cycle is important to the novel?

Discussion Question 2

How does the ending of the novel make you feel? Do you think Isserley went ahead with pushing the button? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the changes in Isserley's life that have led to her leaving Albach Farm. What do you think was the most influential of these changes?

Vocabulary

rudimentary, extrapolating, repugnant, premonition, languorous



Characters

Isserley

Isserley is the main character and heroine of the novel. She is a human being but has allowed herself to be transformed into a close resemblance of a vodsel through major surgeries that have left her with neck and back pain. Her job requires her to pick up hitchhikers, determine if these hitchhikers are people who will be missed if they disappear, and then take them to Ablach Farms with her if she determines their disappearance will not raise any questions.

Apparently, Isserley is well acquainted with the elite in the place from which she came. Sons of the elite had promised that she would never be sent to the New Estates, an underground place where residents are forced to do hard labor, because she was so beautiful. Despite their promises, Isserley was sent to the New Estates. It was a terrifying place for her not only because people grew old and unattractive before their time when they were sent there, but also because it is located underground. Isserley has terrible issues with claustrophobia.

She is offered release from the New Estates after she has been there only three days on the agreement that she would take the job at Ablach Farms. Isserley believes she is indispensable because she believes she is the only one who would be willing to make the sacrifices she did for the job. She learns from Amlis that there are others who would be willing to do her job just because they would be able to live above ground.

After being attacked by one of the hitchhikers whom she tries to pick up and getting insights from Amlis about how cruel the processing is to the vodsels, Isserley rethinks her job at the farm. She decides that she no longer wants to work there and drives away, trying to decide how she will live the rest of her life. She picks up a hitchhiker, a man eager to see his girlfriend who is having his baby, unwillingly. As she drives a rattling she has noticed in her car gets worse and she loses control. Her car collides with a tree. The man whom she picked up is thrown out of the car. Because she believes she will actually become a part of the beauty of the world, Isserley uses the aviir in the car to kill herself.

Amlis Vess

Amlis Vess is the son of the owner of Vess Industries. He stows away on a transport ship to Ablach Farms so that he can see for himself what is really going on there. He is shocked by the cruelty he finds in the holding and processing of the vodsels. In an attempt to make a statement about the cruelty, Amlis lets some of the vodsels go free. He does not realize they no longer have the ability to live outside the protection of the steading.



Even though Isserley had believed that Amlis would be snotty just because he is a member of the elite, she is surprised that he is so down to earth. He helps to change her mind about the job she does as well as her ability to enjoy the beauties of nature.

Isserley is not only attracted to Amlis physically but also grows to like him as a person because she is able to share the beauty of the outside world with him and see his wonder. He also makes her realize that he sees beyond the surgery that had manipulated her outer features to the person she is inside.

Pennington Studio

"Pennington Studio" is the last man that Isserley kidnaps. When she burns his things she assumes his name is Pennington Studio because that name is stamped on the bottom of a wedding photo that she finds in his wallet. She does not realize it is the name of the photo studio that took the wedding photo.

Isserley picks up on how unhappy "Pennington" is with his life. In fact, he is so unhappy that he feels sorry for Isserley for being the one to have picked him up. When "Pennington" tells Isserley that he is living in a van with a dog, she assumes that no one will come looking for him.

Isserley has in dream in which she transforms into "Pennington's" dog, which he told her was locked in his van. She decides to go and set the dog free. Isserley also considers trying to set "Pennington" free but decides he would probably be happier being killed since he has already been castrated and had his tongue cut out.

Ensel

Ensel is a man who works at Ablach Farms. He is always the first to greet Isserley when she returns to the farm with her latest vodsel. Even though it irritates her, Ensel always tells Isserley that the vodsel she has just brought is the "best one yet" (50).

Ensel is the one in charge of keeping Isserley's car running even though Isserley has learned to do much of the upkeep on her own. After she has to start driving a different car because she had picked up a man whose family began to look for him, Ensel is the one who tells Isserley that anyone could have made the same mistake she did.

Ensel appears to care for Isserley even though Isserley discourages him every chance she gets. She believes she is of a higher class than he is, and for this reason refuses his favors. During Amlis' talk with Isserley he tells her that Ensel truly does care about her.



Anthony Mallinder

Anthony Mallinder is the man whom Isserley kills when he sexually assaults her. She had picked him up as a hitchhiker and attempted to inject him with icpathua so he could not hurt her but the needles would not penetrate the thick coat he was wearing.

Anthony puts a knife to Isserley's side and forces her to drive to a secluded spot. Once there he makes her give him oral sex and then tries to have sex with her but cannot find her genitals. Isserley makes a show of trying to point out where they are but in reality lures him closer so that she can use her fingers to gouge his eyes. She digs deep enough through his eye sockets that she kills him.

Yns

Yns is the engineer at Ablach Farm. He is the one who sets up Isserley's car so that it can inject the passenger with icpathua through the seat cushion. He also adds the cylinder of aviir next to the engine, a safety in case Isserley gets into trouble and needs to destroy herself and the car. Yns is one of the men at the farm who is charged with watching Amlis after he allowed four vodsels to go free. After Isserley is so hateful to Amlis about the freeing of the vodsels, Yns jokes with Amlis that he thinks Isserley likes Amlis.

William Cameron

William Cameron is the red-haired hitchhiker whom Isserley kidnaps soon after her encounter with Anthony Mallinder, the man who tried to rape her. Because she is still so stressed from the rape incident, Isserley is unable to talk to William and shot him with the icpathua before she found out if he would be missed by anyone.

Isserley later sees on the television news that police are searching for William. She fears when she hears this news that she has messed up and will be fired from her job.

Esswis

Esswis is the caretaker of Ablach Farm. He serves as the public face of the farm. He, like Isserley, had surgery to make him appear to be a vodsel. Esswis is very private and spends most of his time in his house. The only time he really makes an active contribution to the story is when he and Isserley go out hunting the vodsels that Amlis set free.

Hilis

Hilis is the chef for the underground processing company at Albech Farm. He is the one who seduces Isserley with the smell of the roasting vodsels meat.

Harry Baillie

Harry Baillie was the original owner of Ablach Farm. He had been a pillar of the community as opposed to the current owner.



Symbols and Symbolism

Isserley's Breasts

Isserley's breasts symbolize one of the main points of interest on a vodsel woman for a vodsel man. Isserley's breasts were copied from a supermodel magazine and implanted onto her chest in order to make the men she picked up as hitchhikers more interested in talking to her. Her breasts are mentioned in almost every chapter in the novel.

Red Toyota Corolla

This red Toyota Corolla is basically Isserley's work vehicle. It symbolizes pain for her because even after her surgery it is difficult for her to sit up straight and drive, but it also symbolizes her livelihood and ticket out of the New Estates.

Icpathua

Icpathua is a symbol of Amlis and his disobedient nature. Although he argues that the drug is just a naturally occurring plant that can help with pain relief and can help a person improve his mood, many at home believe his use of this drug is shameful. Because Isserley is in such pain after she has not only abused herself by not doing her exercises but also lain on the deck of the transport ship, Amlis talks her into trying the plant, which she finds does help her to feel better.

Isserley's Hands

Isserley's hands symbolize the first hint that those riding in the car with her get that something is wrong with her. One of the men believes Isserley might have damaged her hands through some sort of work that she did at one time while another notices the scars and wonders if she had some sort of car accident.

Thick Corrective Lenses

These thick corrective lenses are symbols of Isserley's attempt to hide her real identity from the vodsel. She wears the lenses not because she has bad vision, but because surgeons were not able to do anything to reduce the size of her eyes. A vodsel looking at her through the glasses would think that her eyes appeared to be large because of the prism effect of the lenses.



Large Grey Stanley Knife

This knife is a symbol of Anthony Mallinder's dominance over Isserley. He holds this knife to her side while he forces her to perform sexual acts with him.

The Cradle

This piece of equipment is ironically called the cradle but does not symbolize the comfort and security that the image of a baby's cradle brings to mind. It is instead a symbol of torture. This cradle is where the vodsels that Isserley brings back to the farm are put to have their tongues amputated and their testicles removed. It is to this same piece of machinery that the vodsels are strapped when they are slaughtered.

The Clock

The clock in Isserley's room is a symbol of her mental and emotional status. When the clock begins flashing and does not show the time because it has lost power, Isserley feels that she is beginning to lose control over her life. She symbolically replaces the batteries and sets the clock to the correct time when she decides it is time to take control of her life again.

Pennington's Pullover

This pullover is a symbol of the last man that Isserley picked up before she decided to quit her job. She keeps the pullover to wear. It is the first item she has ever kept from any of her victims.

Cooked Meat

This cooked meat, which Hillis serves to Isserley, is a symbol of the end result of her job. Later, in an attempt to help Isserley to understand why he does not agree with the killing of vodsels, he takes her down to the vodsels pens. He indicates that the creatures whom appear to be trying to communicate with them are the same ones from whom the meat which she enjoyed earlier came.



Settings

Highlands of Scotland

The Highlands of Scotland encompass the general area in which this novel is set.

Ablach Farm

Ablach Farm is the place that Vess Incorporated uses as a cover for its vodsel processing business. It is on this farm that Isserley lives.

The A9

The A9 is the major stretch of road on which Isserley does a good deal of her scouting for hitchhikers. She spends her days driving up and down this road.

New Estates

The New Estates appears to be some sort of underground work camp to which the lower classes of human beings are sent. Although Isserley had been promised by many of the Elite that she would not be sent to the New Estates because of her beauty, she is given the choice to either go to the New Estates or be surgically turned into a vodsel. Isserley particularly does not want to go to the New Estates because she suffers from a severe case of claustrophobia.

Isserley's Cottage

This small Victorian cottage is Isserley's home on the farm. She remembers how the men on the farm had all pitched in to help make the home livable for Isserley. Her pride, however, kept her from allowing the men to do all of the repairs to the cottage that they might have done.

The Least Shabby Building on the Farm

This building, which Isserley describes as being the least shabby on the farm, is the one under which the vodsel processing business is hidden. There are a variety of underground levels where the male workers eat, live and process the vodsels. The lowest level contains the pens in which the vodsels are kept.



Sea

Isserley spends the night and part of a morning parked near the sea, watching the tide come in and out while she remains in shock after being raped and then murdering the man who raped her.



Themes and Motifs

Injustice

The novel *Under the Skin* by Michel Faber teaches that injustice comes in a variety of forms. Isserley believes that her life has been particularly unjust. When she gets to know the elite Amlis Vess, Isserley realizes that even the rich suffer with injustice. Isserley comes to realize that despite the injustice she has suffered, she has also had some joy in her life from which others have not benefited.

Isserley feels her life has been unjust because she was promised she would not be sent to the New Estates. Instead, when she reached grading age, she was sent there anyway. Isserley carries a chip on her shoulder against the rich because it was the sons of the elite who told Isserley she would never be sent to the New Estates because she was so beautiful.

Although Isserley was given a job choice that allowed her the chance to escape the New Estates, she is angry because she believes the surgery she had to undergo to perform that job took away her beauty. In order to work at the vodsel processing plant, Isserley had to be surgically manipulated so that she could look like a vodsel. She had to have painful operations to straighten her spine, amputate her tail and sixth fingers, give her a vodsel-like face, and graft on breasts.

Isserley immediately hates Amlis because he is one of the rich. When she has the chance to get to know him, however, she realizes that there are parts of his life that are unjust. For instance, his father believes that he is a failure and does not take him seriously because Amlis' views of the world are different. Amlis also has to live underground. He is not able to enjoy nature like Isserley is. He has never experienced rain and snow, and has never seen the ocean.

After her time with Amlis, Isserley realizes that injustice is widespread. She looks at the men with whom she works at the processing plant and realizes that they are being used by Vess Incorporated, just like pieces of machinery that can be discarded when they stop doing their jobs properly. Isserley additionally meets a vodsel who has lost his joy for life. Isserley cries when she sees herself reflected in his eyes because she understands his pain so clearly.

Language

The ability to communicate through language is presented as a sign of intelligence in this novel. As Isserley deals with the vodsels, it is also a sign of the level of intelligence of her captives. There are several points in the novel in which language is discussed and used as a defining point for animals, people and even inanimate objects.



When Isserley first notices the rattle in her car, she wonders if it is the car's way of speaking to her. "She listened some more, trying to imagine how a car might make itself understood" (5). Isserley believes the car is trying to tell her something through a rattling noise it is making. She gives it human-like qualities as she wonders if it is a cry for help or a warning sign something is going badly wrong.

When Amlis spends time in the vodsels pens, he notices that one of the vodsels makes scratches in the dirt. Although Isserley denies it, Amlis believes the vodsels has scratched a word in the dirt and is trying to communicate with him in its own language. Because it has the ability to communicate, Amlis believes the vodsels are intelligent and should not be processed and slaughtered for food. "Amlis would no doubt go into ecstasy over the vodsels' ability to link a pattern of scrawled symbols with a specific sound, however guttural and unintelligible. At a stroke, she would be dignifying the vodsels, in his eyes, with both writing and speech" (184). When Isserley looks at what the vodsels has written she recognizes the word, but knows how Amlis will interpret the situation if he is told this.

There is another scene in which Isserley tries to communicate with the sheep. Because she does not know many languages, she believes herself to be in the class of people who will do anything to get any job they can. This idea can be transferred to the men whom Isserley picks up. The men who speak in proper English without a good deal of cussing and or a heavy accent are those who generally have the better jobs. Those whose speech is improper and is heavily accented are often those he are not highly intelligent and have either no job or a low-paying job.

Male/Female Relations

One of the minor themes in this novel points out the tensions involved when unfamiliar males and female attempt to relate to one another. These tensions are seen when Isserley interacts with the vodsels as she tries to do her job. Relations between Isserley and the men with whom she works are also strained because of their differences in gender. A final thing to notice in the topic of male/female relationships is the way the programs that Isserley sees on television interpret the relationships between the genders.

Every day, Isserley feels the strain of trying to relate to males from the female point of view. When she was surgically manipulated, it was decided by her surgeons, and those in charge at Vess Industries that she should have an enormous pair of breasts grafted onto her chest. While many of the men who get into the car with her judge her based on her large breasts alone, there are a few who are not impressed by her chest size. Notice that most of the men follow the typical male stereotype and try to imagine what it might be like to have sex with Isserley.

As the only female working at Ablach Farm, Isserley also feels stress in her relationships with her fellow workers. Her relationship with one of the men, for instance, is stressed because he tries to give her gifts and seems to like her. Isserley was also



stressed when she originally came to Ablach Farms. She believes the men both thought she was a freak and tried to overdo their kindness because they felt sorry for her.

Although Isserley comes to appreciate Amlis their short relationship also has a good deal of tension in it. A good deal of this tension comes from Isserley's belief that she is ugly. She is not aware that Amlis sees her beauty despite the way her body has been mangled by her surgery. "Do you think nobody is capable of noticing you're a human being underneath?" (243) asks Amlis of Isserley.

On the television, Isserley sees the stereotypical view of the relationships between males and females. For instance, one time she turns on the television she sees women in burkas marching, assumedly for their rights since the television announcers wonder how far the women will be allowed to go. On another program to which Isserley switches, a man is first saving a woman's life and then criticizing her for not doing as she was told. The idea she gets from television is that men are superior to females.

Use of Sexual Innuendo

Although Isserley has lost the ability to have sexual relationships because of her surgery, there is a good deal of sexual innuendo. The first chapter of the novel, in fact, leaves the reader with the impression that Isserley is searching out men with whom she can have sex. Throughout the rest of the novel Isserley thinks of sex often. She is deeply embarrassed by the state of her genitals because she thinks the men with whom she works would like to see what she looks like naked. She is mortified by the vodsel who tries to rape her but cannot find a point of entry.

A good deal of the first chapter of the novel makes the reader believe that Isserley is some badly deranged woman who is picking up men so she can have sex with them. "She was looking for big muscles: a hunk on legs. Puny, scrawny specimens were no use to her" (1). This announcement that Isserley was looking for hunks in the first sentence stays with the reader through the chapter. Another lasting statement is the quote: "She straightened her back against the seat, pushing her chest out. The hitcher noticed all right" (12).

Isserley uses her breasts to entice hitchhikers, strengthening the idea that she wants the men for sexual purposes. Another quote that suggests Isserley is interested in sex from the men is the one where she is "visualizing herself already parked somewhere with a hunky young hitchhiker sitting next to her" (7). Another quote that can be manipulated to seem to say that Isserley is interested in the men for sexual purposes is "All right, yes, he was good: all right, yes, she wanted him" (11). To want someone is sometimes used synonymously for desiring the sexually.

Because of the surgery to remove her tail and give her the ability to stand on two legs, Isserley's genitals are buried under scar tissue. She is embarrassed and distressed by the way she looks. When it comes to the foreign breasts that were grafted onto her she believes the "only good thing about them was that they prevented her seeing what had



been done to her down below” (71). She has warned the men that she wants to be left alone because she is afraid they will come in her house when she sleeps just to see how strange she looks.

Isserley's encounter with the man who attempts to rape her is particularly agonizing because she is so malformed. Even though she thinks of herself as ugly and believes the man would be put off by her deformities, he is not. “‘Jesus,’ he growled from behind her. ‘You been in a car accident?’ / ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘I’m sorry’” (199). Even though she knew he would never be able to find her genitals, she fools him by making him get close enough to her that she can gouge his eyes.

Regardless of her ability to have sex, Isserley still thinks about sex regularly. In the shower one morning, her fingers find their way down between her legs without Isserley's conscious effort. When she realizes what she is doing, she pulls her hand away. After she has left Ablach Farm and is living in her car she wakes from a dream about sex. “She was in so much discomfort, yet still filled with the fantasy of orgasm, that she wanted to laugh” (299). Situations like these throughout the book demonstrate Isserley's sexual frustration and how some of it is caused by her surgeries, and much of it is also caused by her own mental anguish.

Under the Skin

Since this novel is titled *Under the Skin* it follows that one of the main idea is that people and things are often quite different from what one sees on the outside. One way this theme is addressed is through Isserley's concern not about what the hitchhikers looked like on the outside, but instead their muscle structure. Another is the way that Amlis interacts with Isserley when he tries to convince her that he is not only interested in what she looks like.

When she chooses which hitchhikers she will take back to Ablach Farm, Isserley does not choose them based on the perfection of their skin but instead their inside constitution. For instance, Isserley does not turn down men with wrinkles or tattoos, but she does choose not to take a man who tells her that he has lung cancer. She knows the people at Vess Industries are worried only about the condition of the meat they will be able to harvest from the men.

Although Isserley believes she is unattractive on the outside, Amlis tries to convince her that he is not interested in her based on her looks. “Of course I can see what's been done to you, but what I'm really interested in is the inner person,’ he pressed on” (243).

The idea is that a person's worth is not completely based on his outward appearance.



Styles

Point of View

This story is told by a third person omniscient narrator. The story is told mostly from Isserley's point of view with the author focusing on her thoughts and emotions. This emphasis on Isserley is necessary so that the reader can understand why Isserley has such a drastic change of mind about her job and way of life.

There are also points in the novel that the narrator gives the points of view of the hitchhikers who are picked up by Isserley. This is done so that the reader can get an idea what Isserley looks like from the point of view of a real vodsel. Although Isserley believes she is unattractive, most of the vodsels whom she picks up see her as having some sort of unique beauty even though they mostly focus on the huge breasts that have been grafted onto her.

At one point in the story, during a conversation between Amlis and Isserley, the narrator switches to Amlis' point of view. He does this so that the reader can know that even though Isserley has been physically changed by the surgery she has had, Amlis still sees her as beautiful.

Language and Meaning

There are two different aspects of language that are particularly important in this novel. This first is its use to characterize the intelligence and standing in life of the people whom Isserley picks up as hitchhikers. Because Isserley has learned English as a second language, her English is spoken properly with little accent. Some of the hitchhikers she picks up wonder where she is from because she has no accent. Many of the hitchhikers, however, have a heavy Scottish brogue, particularly the ones with little education. Some of these, the last man whom Isserley picks up, for instance, has such a heavy accent that it is difficult for Isserley to understand him. "Ah'm nae gonny pit a hand on yi. Ah'll jest sit! Yi kin tie me up, pit a knife tae mah throat, Ah dinnae care whit yi dae — mah girrilfriend's huvin' a bebbly!" (304). The author tries to copy the heavy accent of this man to help the reader distinguish him from the other hitchhikers.

Although Isserley speaks English when she is around the vodsels, she and the other human beings have their own language that they speak when they are together. This is a nonsense language that is not used regularly but does find its way into the novel from time to time. For instance when Isserley considers Amsil's belief the vodsels were like human beings she thinks of their differences: "They couldn't siuwil, they couldn't mesnishtil, they had no concept of slan. In their brutishness, they'd never evolved to use hunshur; their communities were so rudimentary that hississins did not exist; nor did these creatures seem to see any need for chail, or even chailsinn" (186).



Note that when Isserley decides to sedate William Cameron, she says only one word to him. That word appears to be in her native language. The word “hasusse” (217) has no clear definition though it may be a sort of curse since Isserley felt such a strong wave of hate for him before she shot him with the icpathua.

Structure

This novel is told in the past tense and holds to a fairly linear timeline. It is made up of 13 chapters with Chapter 9 being the shortest chapter at four pages while Chapter 11 is the longest chapter at 27 pages.

The author plays with the reader’s curiosity in the first several chapters by teasing the reader with only bits of Isserley’s story. She is at first seen as a strange women who appears to be picking up male hitchhikers with ideal bodies for the purpose of having sexual relations with them. It is not until later that the reader begins to discover the truth about Isserley’s job.

The exposition sections of the novel include Chapters 1 and 2. The action begins to rise in Chapter 3 when Isserley begins to get wound up because Amlis Vess is coming to visit Ablach Farm. The story climaxes when the hitchhiker tries to rape Isserley in Chapter 8. From this point Isserley tries to determine if she wants to remain working at her job as her emotions remain high. The action begins to fall in the next to last chapter when Isserley comes in contact with the vodsel who is so much like her. The denouement comes with the final chapter while the story ends with the reader in a state of catharsis when Isserley tries to work up the courage to push the button on her car to kill herself, believing she will actually be part of nature once she is dead.



Quotes

Isserley always drove straight past a hitch-hiker when she first saw him, to give herself time to size him up. She was looking for big muscles: a hunk on legs.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: This opening quote indicates how careful Isserley is in choosing the men whom she picks up. The indication is that she is looking for a man who is ideal for sex appeal but it turns out this is not really why Isserley is carefully choosing her men.

She was a weird one all right. Half Baywatch babe, half little old lady.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: One of the men whom Isserley picks up describes her in this way. Her breasts remind him of the Baywatch babe while her seating position in the car and her thick glasses are like those of an old lady.

Vague tattoos disfigured his lean but powerful forearms: skin deep, she reminded herself again.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 2)

Importance: When Isserley spots a man who is tattooed, she reminds herself that what is on the man’s skin will not play any role in the purpose for which the man is being picked up.

The skin on the edge of her hand, along her pinkie and down to the wrist, had a horny smoothness that was texturally quite different from the rest, suggesting scar tissue following surgery.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 2)

Importance: At least two of the men whom Isserley picks up notice how strange her hands look in comparison to vodsels’ hands. This particular man notices that Isserley has scars on her hands. The reader later learns that these scars are the result of the surgery to remove Isserley’s sixth finger from each of her hands.

In fact, whenever she found herself grieving over what had been done to her once-beautiful body in order for her to be sent here, she reminded herself what people who’d lived in the New Estates for any length of time looked like. Decay and disfigurement were obviously par for the course down there.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

Importance: Even though Isserley’s body has been surgically changed to resemble that of a vodsels, she thinks how much worse off she would have been if she had been forced to work in the New Estates, a place where all the people seemed to decay and grow old quickly.



He was blowing in from somewhere much more dangerous than the North Sea, and she could not predict the effect he'd have. Whatever it turned out to be, she certainly wouldn't be able to negate it just by keeping a tight grip on her car's steering wheel."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: In this quote Isserley compares the impending visit by Amlis to the wind that is trying to push her car out of her lane on the road. She fears that Amlis will cause both her life and the purpose of Ablach Farm to be blown off course.

When he set eyes on her, he would see her the way any normal person from home would see her, and he would be shocked, and she would helplessly have to watch him being shocked."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Isserley finally decides that she does not want to meet Amlis because she does not want to see the shock on his face when he sees what she looks like.

Instead, in one humiliating instant, she'd thoughtlessly given him the gift of the tawdry truth, a vision of an ugly freak sleeping on a strange oblong structure of iron and cloth-wrapped kapok, her body wreathed in sheets of old linen, just like a vodsels."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: When Isserley tells Ensel that she is going home to her bed she believes that she has unintentionally given Ensel insight into her life. She hates him knowing that she sleeps in a bed like a vodsels instead of on the floor like a human being. In this novel, vodsels are seen as lower life forms while the humans are thought to be superior.

Our distinguished visitor let them out,' growled Esswis as the car pulled away with a crunch of ice and gravel."

-- Esswis (Chapter 5)

Importance: Esswis is frustrated and angry when he tells Isserley that Amlis allowed four monthling vodsels to escape. They have to hope they can catch the manipulated and malformed vodsels before they are spotted by other vodsels and their production comes under suspicion.

She'd let things veer a little out of control lately; she must restore some order at the earliest opportunity."

-- Narrator (Chapter 7)

Importance: Isserley knew that since Amlis had come to visit she had allowed herself and her life to get out of control. She decides that she needs to take charge of herself and her life, and get things back in order.

They would make this cottage, this draughty near-ruin, a real home for her, a cosy little nest; she was a poor little thing, she must be so upset at how she had been . . . messed about with, yes, they understood all about that, I mean, look at Esswis, poor old bastard;



but she was brave, yes, she was a plucky girl, and they would treat her as if there were nothing odd or ugly about her at all, for she and they were all the same under the skin, weren't they?

-- Narrator (Chapter 7)

Importance: Isserley remembers that when she had first come to live on the farm the men had treated her as if she were somehow helpless without them. She hated the way they seemed to want to help her because they felt sorry for her.

Typical man: so obsessed with his own idealism he was incapable of feeling empathy for a human being suffering right under his nose."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: Isserley is upset when Amlis does not notice how distressed she is in the confines of the floor where the vodsels pens are located. She believes that even though he pretends to be upset about the treatment the vodsels are receiving, he does not even notice that Isserley is suffering as well.

For an instant she racked her brains for a translation, then realized that, by sheer chance, the word was untranslatable into her own tongue; it was a concept that just didn't exist."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: One of the vodsels scratches the word "mercy" in the dirt of one of the pens. When Amlis asks what he has written Isserley realizes she does not know how to tell him because there is no word in their language for the idea of mercy. She has no idea how to even explain the idea to him.

All I'm trying to get across to you,' he persisted, nettled, 'is that the meat you were eating a few minutes ago is the same meat that is trying to communicate with us down here.'"

-- Amlis (Chapter 8)

Importance: Amlis tries to explain to Isserley that the vodsels are intelligent creatures who are capable of communication. He believes their ability to communicate makes it even more of a crime for the humans to capture them, slaughter them and eat them.

He hated to judge anyone by externals. It was the inner person that mattered. But when a woman's external appearance was this unusual, there was every likelihood it would have shaped the whole of her life."

-- Narrator (Chapter 10)

Importance: William Cameron notices Isserley's scars and believes that whatever happened to her has shaped and changed her whole life. William is right about the fact that what happened to Isserley to cause her scars did affect her entire life.



She had a need for release raging inside her, swollen to explosion point, and yet the vodsel's ordeal was over; he was already on his way to join his kind down in the pens."
-- Narrator (Chapter 10)

Importance: Isserley asks to watch the preparation of a vodsel that she had just brought in believing it would give her the release and relief she needs. The vodsel, however, suffers far less than she had in the course of her job. For this reason, she does not get the release for which she had hoped.

What would you want me to do?' he said. 'Volunteer for hard labour? Get my head smashed in by thugs? I'm rich, Isserley. Do I have to get myself killed to atone for that?'"
-- Amlis (Chapter 11)

Importance: Isserley remains so angry with Amlis that he finally asks her if he should volunteer for hard labor just so he can prove to her that he is not like other rich people. He even asks her if she wants him to volunteer for hard labor, an act he knows would get him killed by thugs.

There was something so sick about doing this day after day, going out on the road and seeing if he could trap some poor sucker into giving him a lift."
-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: Although it is Isserley who is trying to trap men by giving them a ride in her car, one of the men whom she picks up believes that it is he who will be taking advantage of her.

They were wondering if she could perhaps see her way clear to supplying them with a vodsel female, preferably one with intact eggs."
-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: The people from Vess Industries ask Isserley to pick up a female with intact eggs. She knows that they intend to try to find a way to mass-produce vodsels in a laboratory, a move that Isserley knows will make her job unnecessary.