

Ian Williams won this year's Giller Prize – and got to meet his CanLit idols

EMILY DONALDSON

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 19, 2019



Ian Williams is pictured after winning the 2019 Giller Prize for his book *Reproduction* at a gala ceremony in Toronto, on Nov. 18, 2019.

Ian Williams won the \$100,000 Giller Prize on Monday night for his debut novel, *Reproduction*. We caught up to the 40-year-old novelist, poet and University of British Columbia professor the following morning, shortly before he boarded a flight back to the west coast.

How was last night?

Maybe in two weeks or so I'll package it. Walking around right now it keeps hitting me, "Yeah, that actually happened." It's like the reverse of death. When you're unprepared for someone to die and you find their slipper under the bed or something. It's just these bursts of joy whenever I see anything slightly bookish.

Did it feel overwhelming?

No. The good thing is we spent two months together, all the writers. And it was stretched out for such a long time, the pre-Prize moment. I actually think that's an ideal thing: if something has to be a competition, let's prolong the moment when it's not a competition for as long as possible.

The Giller is a who's who of the Canadian and literary firmament. Did you meet anyone you admire?

Of course! Margaret Atwood was at the table across from me and Rohinton Mistry was behind me. I was a total fanboy: I got a photo with Atwood and told her things I've wanted to tell her forever, if I ever met her. So that was sweet. And I had a little chat with Mistry, who also lived in Brampton, Ont., and who of course won the Giller of All Gillers.

You touchingly said in your speech that the first book you bought with your own money was Atwood's *The Circle Game*. But you hadn't met her before?

I had, but always at [events] like this. And she needs to be protective, with that scale of celebrity and fame. That's just a necessity for her. And part of the allure is maintaining a healthy distance from her, too: How close do you want to get to Atwood? I actually do want her to occupy this large space of my fantasies still, and always.

Did you ever imagine interacting with her like you did last night, from a stage? As a fellow nominee?

I didn't mean to say anything to her, it just kind of happened. But it exceeds any kind of fantasy I had for my life, so I guess I'll just have to dream harder.

Winning the Giller is a journey, figuratively, but also physically. Can you talk a bit about the tour?

It really was a literal journey! The commitments, criss-crossing the country so casually between Toronto and Victoria and Ottawa, could be onerous. But we spent a lot of time together and saw each other in non-writerly contexts, which was neat. Lots of drinks and coffee and gyms and walks and huddles and waiting for cars to show up. Lots of those insignificant moments that you typically write off.

Had you met the other nominees prior to the prize?

Half of them. But when you go through something really special together, even if you were friends before, the connections just deepen. Remember when Sarah McLachlan did Lilith Fair in the nineties? It's like the Lilith Fair of writers across the country.

There's a tidy parallel in the fact that your book is about strangers becoming family ...

That connection is so smart! This is like a metaphor of that, of how strangers can become family by the end.

The Giller thrusts people who are typically introverts into public positions in a way that few literary prizes do. What's it like facing that wall of flashing cameras?

I'm not deeply reclusive, but I do feel like a lone wolf. When we were doing the readings, we could stand behind our words and talk about books. That was one thing. But the spectacle of the awards show is a whole other thing. Musicians and actors might be used to flashbulbs going off and slinky gowns and tuxes and whatnot. We writers are generally used to hoodies and small audiences. And a large audience is good, but then we get to go back into our huddle. That Giller audience is just another level of extravagance. And maybe it's good for us. It's just a healthy way to expand personally.

I believe André Alexis, who won the Giller in 2015 and was longlisted this year, shares your love of CanLit from the sixties and seventies.

There's something really formative about the sixties and seventies in the presses and experiments that were happening. It's a really satisfying time for a young poet to go back to. The language is fairly accessible, and there's the forging of identity and the boldness and youth of all of these characters. That generation really came into its own with these bold women and men. And that's extraordinary.

Have you had to put your teaching at UBC on hold for your Giller commitments?

I kept teaching, but Alix [Ohlin] is [departmental] chair and she's in the same situation, so that worked out. But no, we taught, moved some classes online. I was flying across the country to teach as well, as best as I could if the conflict could be managed. I'm actually going back tomorrow to do a workshop, and Thursday I'm going to teach a big lecture in my Intro to Poetry class.

It's a crass necessity for me to ask what your plans are for the money...

My answer is refreshingly disappointing: I'm going to stick it in an investment account so it can be used sensibly and responsibly when that time comes. I'll donate some of it, and I will do something good, I just haven't figured out what that good thing is yet.