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FICTION

## An Unlikely Romance Blooms in a Hospital Room, Then Metastisizes



Ian WilliamsCredit...Justin Morris

**By Stephen Kearsse**

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## **REPRODUCTION**

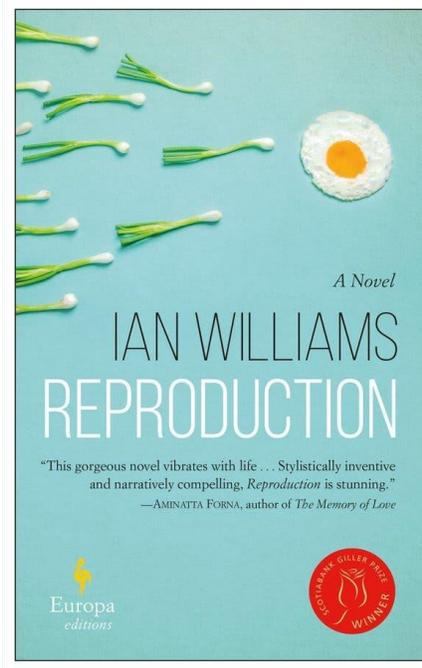
By Ian Williams

In his 2012 poem “Rings,” the Canadian writer Ian Williams turns a verse from Genesis, “Give me children, or else I die,” into a wry refrain. As it appears alongside mundane domestic choices like whether to adopt a pet or redecorate, the desperation of the verse gives way to an offbeat calm. Child rearing may be life-affirming, but in the end it staves off death just as well as anything else — that is, it doesn’t.

“Reproduction,” Williams’s debut novel, expands that arch view of breeding into a peculiar odyssey through cycles of life and death. On its face, it’s a love story: Two immigrants, Edgar Gross (from Germany) and Felicia Shaw (Caribbean, from parts unknown), meet in the palliative unit of a Toronto hospital in the 1970s. Their mothers are dying in adjacent beds, and within those grim, cramped quarters a bizarre courtship erupts like a laugh at a funeral.

Initially, Williams sculpts the narrative around Edgar and Felicia’s stark differences, in the vein of a standard romance. Middle-aged Edgar is an evasive and self-centered burnout; he smokes in the hospital and responds to his unconscious mother’s refusal to die with childish impatience.

Scolding him from across the room, youthful Felicia, a student, brims with anxieties and worries, fretting over everything from the appearance of her mother’s breasts to macabre news from her home country. They are not a natural match.



Straddling grief and flirtation, their conversations take weird, dizzying shapes. Williams presents their exchanges as compact vignettes built entirely of dialogue and inner thought. Their chats are fluid and offbeat, stripped of quotation marks:

He wanted to know why her hair was shorn so aggressively. Are you some kind of feminist? he asked. But he meant lesbian.

I not no feminist.

There's nothing wrong with it. He was relieved. Do you want to work?

Not right now. She put her toque back on. I go work when I finish school.

Then you're a feminist.

He could see that she was trying on the word for sophistication, admiring her calf in its hem.

But I want to have children.

You can't, he said.

The book's standard mode is comedy of errors: rhythmic, fleet and perforated with omissions and miscommunications that beget more of the same.

When the story jumps forward a couple of decades, Williams's experiments with form grow bolder. "Reproduction" takes its structure from the organizing principles of cells and chromosomes: As characters reproduce, perspectives multiply and propagate, too, producing symmetries across generations and families. And, just as cells do over time, the novel's form begins to break down, mutate.

Leaving behind romance, Williams focuses on Felicia and Edgar's son, Armistice, who is both the product of their coupling and — as implied by his sardonic name — the embodiment of its failure. The charismatic and adventurous Army, as he is known, gives Williams the opportunity to examine another family, the Soareses, and the broader social landscape of Greater Toronto in the '90s. The prose takes on a multitude of forms — annotated sheet music, simulations of the "Maury" show, equations, Bible verses, numbered lists, lyrics from Rihanna and the Wu-Tang Clan — as Army and the Soareses, whom he and Felicia rent from and live with, repel and attract each other.

Williams's imaginative, intricate tapestries are dazzling, but the story sometimes feels narrow and deterministic. Few of the characters have attachments beyond the principal cast, and those who do downplay them in ways that feel artificial. Felicia, for example, hails from a "small unrecognized island" whose name is guarded like a secret from the reader and the other characters. It grows distancing: Why would a churchgoing

Caribbean woman in the multicultural suburbs of Toronto go her entire life obscuring her identity?

“Reproduction” is at its best when Williams’s ornate arrangements of life and death feel fragile and unpredictable. He excels at transferring the intensity and action of traumatic events to the doldrums between: phone calls, haircuts, waiting rooms, car rides. In his rich probes of language and intimacy, legacy and inheritance, he slyly shows that reproduction is consequential, but so is everything else.