

BOOK FEATURES

**Ian Williams thrives on stylistic daring in debut novel
*Reproduction***

by [David Chau](#) on March 13th, 2019 at 12:06 PM



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- *Reproduction*, the debut novel by acclaimed poet Ian Williams, looks at how love, ambition, and sorrow recur in the families we both inherit and choose.

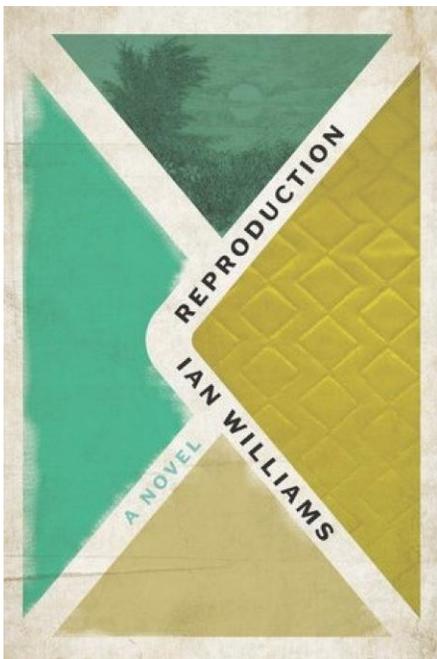
Ian Williams recognizes the importance of blood ties. There is value, he notes, in connections between people that one cannot choose.

“I think the way that life works is that we get both sides, right? On one hand, we don’t choose the families that we’re born into, but then we can choose our futures and choose our mates, and choose the families,” he says. “Given the way life is designed, we’re not even obligated to make that decision. You’re both locked into something and you choose an alternative.”

Family, by birth and by choice, is central to the Vancouver writer’s debut novel, *Reproduction*. The format benefits the acclaimed poet and short-story writer—whose 2011 book, *Not Anyone’s Anything*, won the Danuta Gleed Literary Award—and provides a larger canvas for his boisterous aesthetic.

As the novel opens in late-1970s Ontario, Felicia Shaw randomly meets Edgar Gross in the hospital room shared by their respective mothers. The ensuing story maps the link between the then teenager from an unnamed island nation and the adult heir to a German fortune. “If one calculated the number of hours over a period of months or years that relationships take to develop and applied them into a single, compressed meeting of heightened time, and tested that relationship years later by a reliable metric,” Williams writes in the novel, “would that relationship be as sturdy as a relationship constructed over months or years?”

Soon caring for Edgar’s mother, in the wake of her own mother’s death, Felicia stokes an attachment to the negligent Edgar. According to Williams, the book reveals “how a love story turns into a family story. What makes this love story different—apart from the individuals involved—is the structure of it,” he tells the *Straight*, at a downtown restaurant. “A love story can very easily get mushy, like a soft-boiled egg, so it needs the hardness of structure to contain it. The contrast between the ease of feeling and the firmness, the discipline of the structure, makes a really nice tension.”



Inventive structure and stylistic daring remain signatures of Williams’s output, including *Personals*, his 2012 volume of verse that was a finalist for the Griffin Poetry Prize. *Reproduction* thrums with an array of devices, from a chorus of perspectives to discussions written as asides, which reflects the Brampton-raised author’s taste for surprise and delight in literary endeavours.

A spirited passage, in fact, gave Williams, a poetry professor at UBC, an anchor when he began the novel in 2010, during a teaching stint in Massachusetts. Featuring conversations between Army—Edgar and Felicia’s son—and his mother, this piece became the first installment of “The Sex Talk”, a series of exchanges throughout the book consisting purely of dialogue.

Williams relished writing these segments. Considering that the novel spans decades, the “Sex Talk” portions act like time lapses and capture interpersonal rapport over years. “They’re the shortest sections,” Williams says of these voice-propelled parts. “But they’re the most expansive timewise.”

In the mid-1990s, long after splitting with Edgar, Felicia rents a basement suite for herself and Army from Oliver Soares, a former musician and the divorced father of school-age Heather and Hendrix. Here, Williams introduces new vantage points and deepening themes, as a scandal spurs Edgar to contact Felicia, and the enterprising Army, who has never known his father, engages the Soares to mixed results. (“The real magic of the book happens in the entanglement of those plot lines,” Williams says. “That everybody has their own drive and their purpose, and they’re related to each other in many different kinds of ways.”)

After finishing the novel, Williams was left with a set of characters he favoured but had cut from the narrative. This cast figures, though, in his novel in progress about midlife, which Williams, 40 this year, hopes to complete soon, along with a poetry book.

Divisions due to race and class, and kinship that transcends, embroider his work. Beyond defining their identities, the key struggle many of his characters face is communicating effectively with themselves and others. Despite verbal play, there is “a real sad base note through everything” Williams is inspired to write.

As *Reproduction* vaults into the present day, the plot further emphasizes the parallels between parents and children, families and not-quite families. The concept of reproduction on these pages is as much about the patterns of lives lived—how love and ambition and sorrow recur in individuals and households—as it is about impulse and biology.

Chance and loyalty, after all, can form bonds stronger than shared genetic material. Williams suggests that “there’s a conflict between our environments and our biology....There’s symmetry and all this repetition. And there’s a kind of hope,” he continues, “that people will transcend their circumstances.”