

Not Anyone's Anything

by Ian Williams

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Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

Ian Williams's short-story collection *Not Anyone's Anything* consists of a trio of sections with three stories in each: a pyramid of intricate fiction in which details from one story refer to events told from another perspective in another story. Williams's method is experimental, both in the ways these complex stories interconnect and in the manner in which the elements of narrative and their props are concretely represented on the page. For instance, in the title story, Korean/English flash cards are physically represented with their translations as two-dimensional boxes, and in the story "Prelude," musical notations underscore the narration. In "Break-in," a horizontal line across the page separates the dual narratives without subordinating the subplot to the plot, and in "Join" the two parallel stories are divided by a sometimes broken vertical line down the centre of the page. To heighten the suspense, the narrative in "Breakthrough" breaks off in mid-sentence, then continues the fragment, after a circle symbol denoting a pause, into the next section. The style of presentation seems to be influenced by multiple media, including comic books and graphic novels, TV, and icons made popular by modern technologies.

In the title story, the hard-working Korean girl does her best to reject her persistent but unambitious Serbian lover's advances. While she takes Korean as an easy course to attain good marks, Goran registers in it on a whim to become "Toronto's most overqualified burger flipper when he graduates" (16). The girl includes a list of reasons why she does not want to continue in a relationship:

In trying to understand why I insist on breaking up during the last rounds of flash cards on the nights Goran comes by, my voice and I have duked it out and reached these conclusions: (A) I don't have time for relationship, with the store and the summer courses and all, (B) I don't want Goran to think that I want to get physically involved with him, (C) I can't afford to have Goran go ga ga over me in public and compromise my integrity as a serious student, (D) I don't want to turn into one of those girls who totes around bags from high-end stores and complains when her man doesn't call every night. What else? (E) my highfalutin reason: he turns almost everything into a big joke and hides behind various identities to mask his own, potentially unformed, identity. (25–26)

The tension between the two mismatched individuals becomes comical when the girl takes umbrage at Goran's complaint that "his woman is so businesslike." Williams knows how to turn reported speech into irony even as Jane Austen did more than a hundred years ago. The girl's protest that she's "not anyone's anything" sounds the feminist point of view, but Goran's quaint other-age insistence also amuses (28).

Williams demonstrates understanding and empathy for many kinds of characters, including the would-be kid robber who breaks into "The Houses" described as "Siamese" and "joined at the cheek" (duplexes, I presume). When Hoop hears the front door open, he takes refuge in the basement under the stairs and makes use of an old comforter that happens to belong to the daughter, Janice:

“JaniceIwon’t hurt any of you,” Hoop whispered before she could scream or run, before she knew who she was seeing – that wet forehead, those two dark eyes, which were vibrating, barely, like a tuning fork, from fear to fatigue to anger to madness. He was wrapped in her old comforter. He looked like an Old Testament prophet. (90)

The story continues with escalating humour as Hoops makes promises to God that if he escapes this scrape he will attend church with his mother again, give up ball, not take girls to make out at “The Houses” again, etc. Williams sets scenes that are almost theatrical for the attitudes and situations they represent, and the character of Hoop becomes endearing in a way similar to that of Huckleberry Finn while he, too, remains a product of his upbringing, with something human superadded.

One of the most curious stories in the collection is “The Prelude,” in which the precocious Raq is convinced by her computer-educated brother Dee to have surgery on her hands so that she can play Rachmaninoff, which is said to require man-sized hands. Although the siblings come from an upper-middle-class home in which both parents work, the children manage to get into trouble. Naïveté vies with precocity as Raq finds herself attracted to “the Hulk,” who plays Rachmaninoff during his music lesson, which precedes hers. Williams uses musical notations not only to simulate the music being performed in the background but also to highlight the crescendo of mounting emotions – in Raq, the Hulk, and especially the music teacher – that run parallel to the student’s performance of Rachmaninoff’s rhapsodies. After Raq’s hand has healed, she returns to her music instruction and is shocked on opening the door to the music room:

She is not sure what she is seeing at first. The way they are put together, she thinks she is watching a mutant. The Hulk has four legs, two of them are kneeling, his head is thrown back, his mouth open, his Adam’s apple trembling. (176)

After witnessing this “blur of fingers” – no mere piano playing – she returns to her seat and sits on her hands, her dreams of the Hulk confused, in a scene of dramatic irony at which Williams excels.

The most sophisticated imagery and ironic implications enter the last trio of stories, including not only “The Prelude” but also “Cardiology” and “The Fall.” Whereas “Cardiology” plays with the theme of heart disease and afflictions of the heart from multiple angles of a physical heart, familial love and sexual attraction, “The Fall,” in alluding to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, draws intriguing parallels between the predatory nature of bisexual lust and a woman’s vengeful hatred of a cat’s instinctual appetite to kill birds.

Williams proves himself a writer of intelligence and humour to watch for, both for his edgy style and for the intricacy of his plots, the amazing network of irony and most of all, the human appeal of his characters. ♡

gillian harding-russell has published three poetry collections, most recently *I forgot to tell you* (Thistle-down, 2007). The chapbooks *Maya: Poems for the Summer Solstice* (Leaf Press) and the *Stories of Snow* (Alfred Gustav) came out in 2011 and 2012. Poems have recently come out in the anthologies *That Not Forgotten* (Hidden Brook Press, 2012) and *Poet to Poet* (Guernica), and will come out next year in *I Found It at the Movies* (Guernica, 2013).

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