Naked Before God, by Bill Williams, with Martha Williams.

reviewed by Arthur W. Frank in the February 3, 1999 issue

By Bill Williams, with Martha Williams, Naked Before God: The Return of a Broken disciple. *(Morehouse, 327 pp.)*

When you read this review I hope Bill Williams is still alive. It will be close. Williams was born with cystic fibrosis, as were his two siblings who died as children. His life expectancy was 13. He was 36 when he wrote this book, and his condition was deteriorating. He was born in 1960.

I wanted to read an account of illness by someone who did not become ill at some moment in his or her life but rather was born ill, someone for whom "sickness is part of your very formation," as Williams puts it. But since first-person illness narratives have been the core materials of my professional life for almost a decade, I took up the book feeling like an old illness hand, waiting to see how this author worked out various issues that I have seen many others struggle with. I got a lot more.

Williams certainly tells us about living with a disease that will kill him sooner rather than later. He talks about what's good and bad in hospital care and about having to know his own body--and his medications--in order to keep himself alive.

But his is an illness narrative like no other I have read. The academic description of Williams's kind of writing is "dialogical." Other illness narratives may include bits of dialogue, but they are universally written from a single center of consciousness, the author's. They provide a window into that consciousness to allow readers to view the effects of illness. Like these other narratives, Williams writes in first person, yet his consciousness is constantly being confronted, reshaped and transformed through dialogue with others. And here we leave the secular sphere, because his principal dialogue partner is Jesus--or "jesus" as Williams writes it. His approach became increasingly troubling for me because it made me confront the question of whether I, too, wanted to be in dialogue with jesus. Williams forced me to ask myself how much I want to be healed. I had to put the book down for a while.

Perhaps the typography of "jesus" has already put off some readers. The more I describe this book, the more readers I risk putting off. The Zen scholar R. H. Blyth dedicated a book to D. T. Suzuki as "the only man who can write about Zen without making me loathe it." If we don't end up loathing a religion in its literary restatement, perhaps the greatest danger (loathing being at least an active engagement) is that reading about it may make us see it as something over there, to be observed across the divide of the printed page. The cold comfort of reading such books is that they allow us to be disengaged. But Williams makes jesus here, now; that's his Good News. I had never felt comfortable with the phrase before; now I can think of no other.

Modern-dress gospels have never had much appeal to me, but as Williams's narrative fades back and forth between Bill Williams, former video-game designer turned Lutheran seminarian and sometime hospital chaplain, now struggling against a combination of CF and diabetes, and Nathaniel, sometime disciple of jesus, I had to follow--and did, through the last pages when the risen jesus comes to visit Nathaniel in his hospital room. Another infection (people with CF develop increasingly antibiotic-resistant infections from the clots in their lungs) has put Nathaniel in the hospital; he misses the last supper and watches the crucifixion. "Christ, I'm glad to see you," Nathaniel says, and they laugh at the joke. It's a bad joke, but I shared it, because I too was so glad to see him. Did I read or dream being in that room, or was I there? The book has the effect of making one wonder.

Most of the gospel of Nathaniel is about theodicy, which is the problem of both Williams's own being--did God make a mistake when he made him?--and his chaplaincy, where he found that theodicy "was where the action was." What kind of God has power and love in a world where so much is evil and suffering? "Is it really worth this pain?" Williams wonders, about himself and about many others. "'And if I took away your body's pain right now,' jesus answers, 'would that cure your greater wound? Or would you simply feel that God had repented of his anger? Would you live in freedom with a God that loves you--or would you live in fear that God would change his mind again?'"

That's only the beginning of the dialogue. Winding through Stephen Hawkins's cosmology and through process theology, Williams reaches a sort of answer, but it's less an intellectual solution--solutions, he reminds us, are always breaking down--than a part of the story that ends (or begins again) in that hospital room where jesus visits the sick Nathaniel.

Among the first words that jesus says to Nathaniel / Williams are, "You cannot stay broken forever." For those who need this Good News, I know of no other book with the toughness, the intelligence, the sadness, and the wit, faith and love of this one.