

Conversations with an Angel Named Bill

Michael Hanian

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With philosophy accessible to a lay audience, conversations between a man and an angel offer valuable insight and advice.

A sweet meditation on intentional living from Michael Hanian, *Conversations with an Angel Named Bill*, though brief, proves to be an engaging dialectic narration.

Though only thirty, Max has lost his sense of direction. After entertaining some truly bleak thoughts at home, he goes for a walk one evening and encounters a mysterious figure who offers himself as a companion. "I have an aversion to intrigue," the figure declares, "I am an angel." The eloquence and frankness of his speech remains appealing throughout.

Max is skeptical at first, but his loneliness takes over, and he agrees to engage this maybe-angel, called Bill, in conversation. Such exchanges are relayed in brief but piquing chapters and have a philosophical yet accessible tone. Conclusions are not always as foregone as they are presented, with valuations such as those related to gender proving sometimes hard to swallow, but suspension of disbelief has its rewards.

Bill takes on the role of a teacher to Max's seeker, and he proffers assignments such as "write your own obituary." Through these, and the analyses that follow them, Max and Bill come to agreements on significant life matters: on the importance of human relationships, on making meaning from the mundane, even on the purpose of life itself.

Max blooms under Bill's tutelage, falling in love with a woman named Liz and correcting personal tendencies toward inertia. An unexpected disaster leads the pair to a moment of ultimate internal reckoning, in which Max must decide how committed he is to his probable future. Final moments offer the novel's only real suspense and run into an abrupt, but satisfying, conclusion.

Though meditations on subjects like love and death are tidily wrapped up in individual chapters, readers may find themselves craving more from Max and Bill's exchanges. In the end, Max is the only character who seems sufficiently fleshed out. Liz, though the vehicle by which his life transforms, is never really allowed to self-establish, and Bill remains a shadowy figure throughout.

Outside the philosophical dialogues, Hanian's prose maintains a level of succinctness. This comes to seem regrettable at times, particularly since imaginative moments, as with Bill using a decorative cane as an air-paddle, are lively and quirky. The book is most attractive where it gives itself room to play, and it trips up mostly where its diction becomes stodgy and overly self-aware. "Few would credit the authenticity of my words" has a stiffness absent in more beautiful constructions, such as the "indeterminate" nature of "icy rain or rainy snow."

Originality flickers through this piquant work, and its most unique moments offer considerable satisfaction. Thematically, it treads on familiar ground, recalling Christian fiction projects like Joan Brady's *God on a Harley*. Still, Hanian's voice contributes to the genre with charm.

An enjoyable read that trades between being thought-provoking and breezily consumable, *Conversations with an Angel Named Bill* should appeal to moderate believers and seekers.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September 11, 2014)

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