

2008

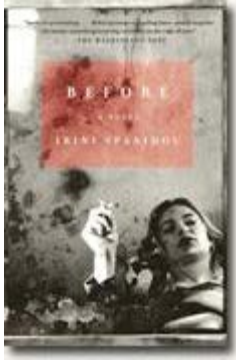
## Book Review: Before

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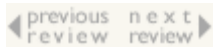
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[Before](#)

Irini Spanidou  
Vintage International  
Paperback  
224 pages  
July 2008  
★★★★☆



The setting for Irini Spanidou's third novel, [Before](#), seems promising enough: New York City in the 1970s, SoHo before gentrification, a place on the cusp of change but still, as Spanidou writes in her book's opening, "dangerous," beset by crime and sparsely populated by bohemians who party deep into the city's empty nights. Unfortunately, the novel's setting, as well as its characters, seem nearly as empty as the streets about which Spanidou writes; as a reader, I must wonder why I am to care about the characters Spanidou creates, or how I am to imagine a setting drawn so faintly.

Certainly I want to like the novel's protagonist, Beatrice, a twenty-something writer living off an inheritance from her grandmother. She is beautiful and intelligent, we are repeatedly reminded, though I cannot imagine the contours of that beauty, nor grasp the nature of her intellect. Beatrice works as an assistant editor, presumably to justify her existence, and is married to Ned, a cruel and self-absorbed artist. They live and fight together in one of those half-empty, dangerous SoHo lofts that, I can only guess, symbolize the dangerous emptiness of their own marriage, of their own lives.



As the novel progresses, Beatrice plummets into frenzied despair, and this fall is the axis on which Spanidou's plot slowly (sometimes painstakingly) spins. We follow a drunken Beatrice into the perilous city streets, into the beds of unattractive lovers, into her self-realization and "the rest of her life," which promises to be no satisfactory life after all.

The protagonist's name is, of course, a nod to Dante's own Beatrice, the woman of incomparable beauty and virtue who inspired several important works in the Western literary tradition. Because Spanidou's Beatrice is so slightly drawn, however, it is never certain whether her Beatrice is meant to be an ironic figure, or whether readers are to find in the Beatrice of [Before](#) a kindred spirit to the Beatrice of the *Divine Comedy*.

At any rate, it seems Spanidou would have us believe men are drawn to Beatrice for some ineffable quality never made entirely clear. We are also to believe that Beatrice sees something in her lovers that, perhaps, we cannot see. Most surely, her attraction to Ned is never fully explained: why would Beatrice pine for a man so abusive and angry? For a man who leaves her to ramble through a dangerous, dark loft apartment (with an ex-convict next door) in her darkest hour?

Because Beatrice suffers so cruelly at her husband's hand, because she is wayward and broken, I really want to root for her, to find her finding herself and claiming a life better than the one in which she is mired. Instead, I care little about Beatrice's fate, nor about any other person in the book. Spanidou fails to make me connect with her characters because, in part, she fails to create full-bodied characters with whom anyone can connect.

Spanidou surely has talent as a writer. Her earlier novels, *God's Snake* (1986) and *Fear* (2000), received critical acclaim for their vividly crafted characters and settings. At times in [Before](#), too, readers catch a sense of Spanidou's admirable writing style, her attention to finely wrought sentences. Yet in [Before](#), Spanidou seems to have shifted her focus to writing about an idea, a sensibility, vaguely embodied in Beatrice wandering through New York City. Because we do not see Beatrice well, readers will also not fully understand the idea Spanidou is working toward—or, if they do understand, they will long have ceased to care.