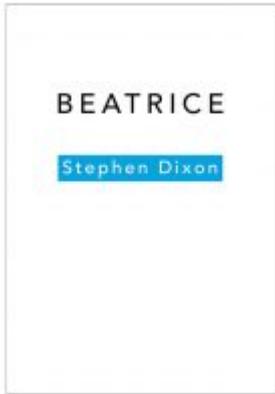


Beatrice by Stephen Dixon

written by Guest Contributor | May 10, 2016



Beatrice by Stephen Dixon
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102 pages – [PG](#) / [Amazon](#)

Ah, Beatrice Portinari. The Florentine woman, typically cited as the real-life inspiration for Dante Alighieri, who leads the “Dante” of the *Paradiso* through the beatific portion of his *Commedia*. For the Dante of the text, Beatrice is known solely by her Christian name, clearly an emblem of ideal love. The cunning, slippery Stephen Dixon seems to summon her in the surname-less title of his most recent offering, *Beatrice*. For Dixon, himself an aging writer and former professor, the protagonist of this novel, Philip Seidel, is very much like his “Dante.” But who is Beatrice?

On page one, a student knocks on the door of her erstwhile creative writing professor, eventually leading to a simple yet genuine friendship. “She gave her name,” Dixon writes. “Beatrice Hagen. When she was his undergraduate student a thousand years ago, she said, it was Bea, with the same surname. He said he thinks he remembers her.”

The narrative tracks the ritual that develops between Beatrice and Seidel—a ritual of planned meals at an otherwise uninspiring restaurant—as well as the developing mini-saga in the professor’s mind of trying to understand their relationship. Could the woman, so many years his junior, possibly be a love interest? This inner monologue, though occurring infrequently and always at a slant, is perhaps the chief plot conflict of the text.

She came back with two glasses of wine and sat down beside him. Sure he wants red? They’re both in fresh glasses. Which one does she want? Same as before: whichever one he doesn’t. By the way, that kiss on the head before meant she thinks he’s very nice. But where were they? In their talk? He’ll stick with the red. She gave him the glass.

Or is the book really about the professor’s late wife Abby, a mostly pleasant and unobtrusive ghost-of-the-text whose contours are sketched through her similarity to his friend Beatrice? It’s majestic the way Dixon makes Abby’s

hologrammatic character come to life. And it's magical that I can hardly even locate a passage in which she is mentioned, beyond the most mundane reference.

You see, even the most compelling aspects of the plot's micro-conflicts are buried in play-by-play conversation. One might think of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, often credited with getting the ball rolling in a moment-to-moment, stream-of-consciousness tradition. But Dixon does not hold these moments aloft through elevated passages or grandiloquent gestures. He does not stuff his text with symbolic allusions. Quite the opposite. At times, Dixon makes us wonder why on the actual earth we are reading a passage like this:

His life is so much the same. This, that, repeated daily with only slight variations. Up early, exercise, writing, Y, local food market or a tall latte in a mug and toasted whole grain bagel with butter, and if they're out of it, then a plain at a Starbucks about a mile from the Y so not much out of his way home, writing, drink of two while reading the *Times*, maybe a long walk before and sometimes, if his left knee doesn't hurt [...]

The writing in here is *intentionally* tell-not-show. And yet this little book *Beatrice* is, quite clearly, a love story. It's not a bodice-ripper. It's not rom-com. Neither is it the distant, imagined, mythologized love of Dante Alighieri for Beatrice Portinari. No, it's the love that develops from shared interests and simple conversation. Food. A good book. It's the love that exists between dear friends who admire one another, can chit-chat over coffee and grits.

Exchanging ideas with his friend Beatrice about another writer, Seidel thinks:

And he supposes he's young? She. Thirty-two. That's good too. To be so young and good. Nobody paid any attention to him like that till he was past forty, and nobody much after that either. Oh, come, come. It's true. He'd also like to read her paper on this writer.

While the observations are about another writer, the reader inevitably draws the comparison to Seidel. Not merely a comparison to Seidel, but also to author Stephen Dixon. Dixon has already laid bare Seidel's preoccupations with his own image as a writer. We also hear echoes of Seidel's concerns about whether Beatrice "pays attention to him," how. What does it mean to pay attention to someone? To pay attention to a writer? And to what extent is Seidel, the "Dante" of this text, an obvious extension of the 79-year-old Dixon? The prolific, two-time National Book Award finalist widely hit with the enigmatic appellation "a writer's writer."

For all of these fascinating questions, though, I return to the fictional professor's late wife Abby. In the front matter, or peering around the margins, or tiptoeing among the seraphs, I seem to see her here. Is she the true Beatrice?



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