The Call of Character

The Call of Character engages questions of perennial interest to philosophers, theorists, and all individuals, and Mari Ruti is perhaps uniquely qualified to write it. She has an uncanny ability to translate complex theoretical issues into clear and readable—yet not the least bit dumbed-down—prose. Her treatment of the timeless question (what makes for a good life?) is both original and insightful. I wholeheartedly recommend this book.

—Susan Neiman, Dartmouth College

“This book will contribute powerfully to discussions of the self from a position both inside and outside the critical psychoanalytic discourse.” —Gail Newmyer, Williams College

“Ruti’s fabulous new book reveals in the unanswerable mystery of the call of character—that aspect of ourselves that makes each of us unique, passionate, yet also perpetually dissatisfied and longing more. In Ruti’s hands, dissatisfaction at our incompleteness becomes not a reason for despair but a source of fascination and political possibility: a summons to pursue an erotics of being in the most mundane aspects of our everyday lives.” —Agne Buffet, Emory University

“The Call of Character is expansively erudite yet plain-spoken, honest with a dazzling self-consciousness that situates itself historically in our present moment. Ruti’s singular voice gives words to those necessary though often disavowed tensions of human life. I have already used insights from this book in my work with patients, to whom I wholeheartedly recommend Ruti’s works before. She helps us to understand our private impediments that inherently obscure our relation to our own desires. The Call of Character should be read by academics, clinicians, and students, but most importantly by those who want to live with authentic vitality in a world that makes it seem difficult to do so.” —Joseph S. Reynoso, Psychoanalytic Psychology

P.H.D. in Sociology, Yale University

Sociologist

LIVING A LIFE WORTH LIVING

The Call of Character

Mari Ruti

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS | NEW YORK

Downloaded from columbia.edu
THE CALL OF CHARACTER
The Call of Character
Living a Life Worth Living

Mari Ruti

Columbia University Press
New York
To AZ

I wrote this book for you before I even met you.
CONTENTS

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xv

PART I. THE ART OF SELF-FASHIONING
1. The Call of Character 3
2. The Process of Becoming 21
3. The Specificity of Desire 40

PART II. THE ART OF SELF-RESPONSIBILITY
4. The Blueprints of Behavior 63
5. The Alchemy of Relationality 80
6. The Ethics of Responsibility 99

PART III. THE ART OF SELF-SURRENDER
7. The Swerve of Passion 123
CONTENTS

8. The Upside of Anxiety 141
9. The Erotics of Being 159

Notes 177
Index 185
One of the peculiarities of this book is that it presents relatively complex ideas in relatively simple language. I chose this approach because I believe that my topic—the question of what makes each of us a unique and idiosyncratic character—should be accessible to readers beyond the academy. At the same time, I have sought to avoid the overly simplistic tone of much of the popular writing on the theme. When self-help or New Age gurus tackle the question of what it means to lead a fulfilling life, the kind of life that feels worth living, they tend to advocate a streamlined program of (concrete or spiritual) steps that is supposed to lead to a harmonious existence, thereby sidestepping all the ways in which human life is not designed to be harmonious. Likewise, they tend to fall back on an untheorized notion of what it means to be a human being in the first place, talking as if the matter were completely straightforward. It’s not. As a result, if this book has a goal, it is to remain