

REVIEW

Mari Ruti, *The Summons of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-231-15816-9

Mari Ruti's *The Summons of Love* is a self-help book with a unique twist: it's grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The insertion of high theory into the advice-book genre is on its face wildly audacious. In its execution, Ruti's book offers a very smart and perceptive discussion of love, and I recommend it highly. Ruti—a distinguished and prolific academic author and associate professor of theory at the University of Toronto—here offers reflections on love in a very accessible style, sans footnotes or citations. Once one adjusts to the jarring collision of discourses, *The Summons* becomes a powerful manifesto against complacency in love, teaching us “to allow our lover to rest within the tangle of his ambivalence,” to perceive “the worldness of the world,” and “to become fully and passionately immersed within its folds.” (147, 46) It remains up to the reader to figure out how best to become so entangled and immersed—the book wisely does not develop a schedule of activities designed to improve relationships, nor does it provide case studies or examples. However, its abstraction feels warranted, as eroticism does not lend itself to clear roadmaps. Indeed, Ruti takes a firm stand against the scripted management of erotic life, noting that any attempt to devise “strategies” for love would be “more than a little bizarre.” (72) It's a strange and elegant book about committing to the horror and ugliness of love, so that one can experience love as a life-changing event—even through exposure to despair, resentment, boredom, and betrayal.

It is easy, reading this book, to envision Ruti as Jonathan Richman in the film *There's Something About Mary*, perched in a tree, strumming a guitar, and singing: “True love is not nice, no no.” It is a book filled with warnings rather than reassurances, offering only the injunction “to remain faithful to the summons of love despite its risks.” (7) By “faithful,” Ruti does not mean stable or permanent. We need not try to avoid the end of love, she argues, as it “is simply in the nature of eros to exhaust itself.” (154) Fidelity to a relationship, then, does not imply a static commitment. (147) Rather, we should be “giving ourselves over to erotic experience” in order to find “a certain porosity of being.” (51, 54) Chapters begin by outlining, in very accessible terms, a problematic facet of love (which is always secretly a psychoanalytic concept): melancholia, narcissism, and the Thing are examples. After a practical introduction to each problem, Ruti, in each chapter, guides the reader through its implications, so what always begins as a freshman's introduction to psychoanalysis invariably gives way to challenging and counterintuitive relationship advice. The advice is never easy, exculpatory, or reassuring, and, as each chapter unfolds and as chapters begin to build upon each other, the les-

sons become more and more profound. We learn, for instance, that “eros rewards us only to the extent that we are willing to temporarily sideline, or [even] suspend, the socially intelligible persona through which we customarily negotiate our place in the world.” (49) It is a book about how to become fragile, vulnerable, and sympathetic. For Ruti, loving well requires careful thought and extraordinary empathy, because erotic life is unpredictable.

Because love is delicately intersubjective, everything is at stake in one’s choice of partner: being in love, and how, and with whom, literally makes you into who you are. Ruti wants the reader to think through, but also learn to simply accept, “the mysterious specificity of desire.” (78) Desire is idiosyncratic because we are “inherently historical creatures”—I think that this phrase would be a very useful way to introduce people to psychoanalysis—such that “our character is a sedimented depository of our losses.” (138, 128) As we continue to revisit constitutive trauma and anticipate inevitable misfortune, we can learn to find “solidarity of vulnerability” with our partners. (34) Much of the advice here is about building a flexible rapport with one’s partner, something that is valuable to aspire toward, but also slightly unexpected in the Lacanian context, given Lacan’s insistence that there is no rapport possible between the sexes. (Lacan, *Seminar XIX*, May 17, 1972) Ruti advises her reader to receive love’s provocations with courage, although it’s easiest and less disruptive to ignore them or accept them only guardedly. Here, love is a sudden fissure in the world, aspiring to its transformation, carrying into death and beyond. Love is the experience of the sublime. (2-3)

The Summons of Love is supposed to “bridge” the “intellectual ambitions of the university and the lived realities of the world.” (10) Although I have doubts about whether those worlds were ever really separate—university employees certainly live in the world, too, and sometimes fall in love—the bridge is still beautifully well built. Certainly, there are benefits and liabilities to this hybrid format. Ruti’s more traditional academic work (*Reinventing the Soul* and *A World of Fragile Things*, especially) is much more insightful and groundbreaking at the level of theory. However, if one can accept that this book is simply trying to give people some helpful and friendly reflections about love, it is actually illuminating. Ruti writes with such a measured, reasonable tone that, when she invokes Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, or Luce Irigaray to advance an idea, the effect is truly (and valuably) disarming. Against all odds, it is actually quite delightful to see Lacanian points converted into self-help rhetoric: for instance, the graph of desire from Lacan’s “Subversion of the Subject” essay becomes: “Sometimes we become so entangled in enervating webs of alien meaning that we gradually lose track of our own wishes and desires; we become numb to our own needs because we are too intently focused on trying to interpret the needs of others.” (81) Elsewhere, the book valorizes the caress, a concept borrowed from Irigaray; love as a life-changing event, *pace* Badiou; and Winnicott’s theory of “true” and “false” selves, among many other concepts.

Because of this style, the book risks flattening out all of psychoanalytic theory into one undifferentiated and trans-historical pool of thought: here, Ruti draws from a long trajectory of pre- and post-Freudian intellectual history, spanning Plato to Eric Santner. Aristotle, Nietzsche, Stendhal, Freud, Lacan, Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, Winnicott, Copjec, Žižek, and Badiou are all cited approvingly, one beside the next, as if iterating versions of the same idea. *The Summons of Love* never challenges these esteemed thinkers, finds them incommensurate, or

adapts their ideas to new contexts—rather, it presents their ideas as nuggets of wisdom and as support for its claims about love.

Meanwhile, *The Summons* frequently attacks pop psychology and the genre of self-help. A passage denouncing the notion of “self-awakening,” for instance, enables Ruti to demonstrate the difference between *The Summons* and the banal and reassuring books with which it will supposedly compete. (45) She takes special care to refute and rebut Eckhart Tolle, author of *The Power of Now* and mainstay of the Oprah book club. While Ruti is not wrong in her criticisms, this sort of thing does not seem like a fair fight, and does not seem strictly necessary—Tolle is not the intellectual peer of Ruti and isn’t aspiring to join a scholarly theoretical debate. No one needs *The Summons* to learn that Nietzsche and Irigaray are more profound than Tolle, so I would have rather that Ruti refuted a more sophisticated position than mass-market self-help books—perhaps a psychoanalytic thinker like Badiou or Sigi Jottkandt, each of who have written recent books about love. I say this because one of the strongest parts of the book is the conclusion, in which she challenges Judith Butler—for the first time in *The Summons*, here, Ruti pursues a point of disagreement with a worthy interlocutor. Against Butler, Ruti warns that, “positing inner opacity as semiautomatic grounds for forgiveness makes it far too easy for us, as well as for others, to relinquish responsibility at those very moments when self-interrogation would be most necessary.” (162) As a consequence, she argues, one is radically responsible for one’s unconscious and can expect others to be so responsible. This, really the first truly original theoretical point in *The Summons*, seems to aggregate the wisdom collected over the course of the book, wisdom drawn from the long history of pre- and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and move it into the ethical register very compellingly.

I wonder how Foucauldians will react to this book. (I mention it because this is a book review for *Foucault Studies*). I am myself a tremendous admirer of Foucault’s work, and have learned so much by reading him, and those he has influenced, and indeed the journal *Foucault Studies*. However, and on the whole, my own theoretical investments have been generally more aligned with Ruti’s—Freud, Lacan, psychoanalysis. I suspect that I enjoy *The Summons* so much because of these shared investments—it’s extremely charming, and even illuminating, to find psychoanalytic discourse transformed into relationship advice. This being said, Foucauldians will probably be less well disposed toward the book’s psychoanalytic assumptions. After all, Ruti presents psychoanalytic theory as a fount of facts about love: the impression she gives here is not *Freud once argued that...* but rather *erotic life is thus*. Obviously, this is ideology at work: it makes a set of radical ideas seem natural, inevitable. Meanwhile, *The Summons of Love* imagines subjectivity as a mysterious, profound depth, and there is a constant injunction to know oneself and one’s lover more and more intimately. Although I do not necessarily object to this myself, still I wonder if it might implicitly discourage more radical erotic arrangements: the claim here is that the monogamous norm is already plenty radical, and that one’s erotic life is built out of *my history, our history together, and my family*. This sort of thing is not inappropriate for a work of psychoanalytic theory, and it is certainly not inappropriate for a self-help book, but I note that, to a Foucauldian reader, psychoanalysis and self-help might seem like two iterations of the same discourse, really technologies of “sexuality,” which together demand further and further intimacies, in stereo. *The Summons* wants you to attend to the specificity of your lover: one is supposed to love the singularity, uniqueness, and particu-

larity of one's partner. Here, we find a highly modern demand for a unique subject, innately special and in need of recognition, but instead of presenting this form of "sexuality" as an outgrowth of nineteenth-century knowledge and power, *The Summons* presents these ideas as timeless and enduring: Aristotle and even Zeus himself are cited as sources. Love, for Ruti, "might even empower us to connect to the 'truth' of our being"—a proposition, which may seem profound to a reader of Irigaray, but would make any self-respecting Foucauldian recoil in terror: here, one's "truth" is supposed to be a hidden, inner property, reflected in one's "sexuality," and its discovery is supposed to be "empowering." (64) Indeed, Ruti describes an "inner giant" living inside you, wanting to be set free. (7) Here, love is extraordinary and authentic, while life is plain. Here, culture as a whole exists in opposition to love, so that there is some perverse heroism, even ethics, in following its invitation, freeing one's inner giant, experiencing the sublime, and forestalling the "speck of corruption," which affiliates one's lover with the banality of the world. (24) As an admirer of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* and Lacan's *Seminar VII* I can easily accept this, but I should also note that our whole culture, from Shakespeare to Austen and onward through dating websites and John Hughes films, has actually valorized love, and actually demands it of each subject as a condition for successful adulthood. (Our culture also demands heroism of everyone, frankly—so it is quite convenient to think of *love* as a kind of *heroism*). One might say that *The Summons of Love* makes a vexing ideological demand of its reader: do exactly what's expected of you, against all odds, and you'll be an ethical individual subject with a flourishing monogamous relationship based upon the fetish for intimacy. For Ruti, love is simply "two people doing their best to relate to each other on the basis of what is inimitable about each." (26) I imagine that readers of *Foucault Studies* might be, on the whole, resistant to this message.

This sort of criticism, however, seems somewhat misguided, given how this is at root a relationship advice book. The book is wonderfully successful in carrying out its premise: it brings Lacanian analysis to the genre, such that it becomes an exceptionally insightful participant in it. Yes, self-help and psychoanalysis are probably the technologies of modern sexuality *par excellence*, but people will not be reading *The Summons* for a critique or history of modern sexuality, but rather as a way to sort out their lives, love more compassionately, and to learn to accept a few risks. *The Summons* offers wise lessons in genuine intimacy, and as a side benefit, a primer on psychoanalytic theory. This book succeeds brilliantly in all of those ways, and—who knows—it may even have the potential to improve its readers' lives. I would not doubt it.

David Sigler
 University of Idaho
 P.O. Box 441102
 Moscow, ID 83844-1102
 USA
dsigler@uidaho.edu