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TITLE INFORMATION

THE HEART OF IT ALL

Courter, Justin

Owl Canyon Press (158 pp.)

\$18.95 paperback, \$6.99 e-book

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BOOK REVIEW

An aimless 30-year-old man returns home to Ohio to take care of his Alzheimer's-stricken grandmother in this bittersweet comic novel.

John Ritter is back in Cincinnati—or “the Nasty,” as he calls it—in the year 2000, “the first year of this brave new millennium.” He’d left his hometown after dropping out of college nearly a decade ago, but he’s come back to live with his ailing grandmother Beatrice and protect her from Aunt Maylene, who wants to put her in a nursing home. Also, he says, “it’s a relief to have a free place to stay.” Beatrice’s farm outside the city, where she and her late husband once created a children’s book series about pixies, was his childhood refuge and later a hangout for him and his college girlfriend, Carla. He keeps thinking he sees Carla, but it’s “just like all the other times I’d seen her before in different cities all over the country. She was somebody else.” He keeps busy by bringing Beatrice to an Alzheimer’s day care program; working as a landscaper, as he did many years ago; and going on nighttime runs to deface billboards with his stoner college buddy. This routine shatters, however, when he finally meets up with Carla, Maylene makes moves to sell the farm, and the sometimes-lucid Beatrice helps him focus on his talent for drawing. Novelist and poet Courter (*The Death of the Poem*, 2008, etc.) creates a modern version of Holden Caulfield in this fine sophomore novel. Just like Salinger’s hero, Ritter riffs on “phoniness”—in this case, the materialism rampant in “the Nasty”—as he clearly yearns for something better in life. His conversations with Beatrice are particularly affecting, and his identification with her pixie characters is gracefully executed. The scenes at his grandmother’s day care and at his landscaping job are sharp and funny. Ritter’s prolonged disaffection isn’t always fully understandable or sympathetic, but Courter still evocatively sketches his character’s angst and confusion, which are echoed in his beloved grandmother’s wandering mental state.

A moving, amusing novel offering a mix of wry observation and touching moments of intergenerational connection.

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