

THE HEART OF IT ALL

Christian Kiefer

Paperback 978-1-68589-081-0

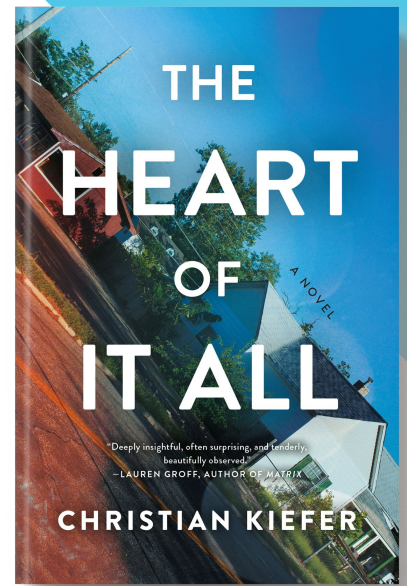
eBook 978-1-68589-072-8

“Recalls Richard Russo’s *Nobody’s Fool*...Kiefer has a sympathetic and probing eye that gives his characters solidity, kindling empathy and anxiety...A thoughtful look at those just getting by from a writer who deserves to be known.”

—*Kirkus, STARRED Review*

“Sublimely crafted...an exquisitely wrought and insightful look at how people deal with misfortune and inequities.”

—*Publishers Weekly, STARRED Review*



INTRODUCTION

A small, declining town in Ohio. A family bereaved by terrible loss. A searing narrative about how American lives touch each other across divides both real and imagined...

Set in failing small town in central Ohio, *The Heart of It All* asks how one manages, in an America of increasing division, to find a sense of family and community.

Focusing on the members of three families: the Baileys, a white family who have put down deep roots in the community; the Marwats, an immigrant family that owns the town’s largest employer; and the Shaws, especially young Anthony, an outsider whose very presence gently shakes the town’s understanding of itself.

A gorgeous, stirring novel in the classic vein of Richard Ford, Marilynne Robinson, Richard Russo, and Kent Haruf, *The Heart of It All* asks the reader to consider an America both divided and bound by its differences.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Two voices in particular—Sam’s and Amy’s—are left out of the chorus of individual perspectives that form the narrative. How do you think their inclusion would have changed the story and its themes?
2. Tom Bailey engages in reckless and hurtful behavior. How do these actions affect our perception of him? Can his behavior be justified by his grief?
3. With the division and isolation that has impacted the town, do you see commonalities in the experiences and feelings of the characters? Do you think that loss and heartbreak can create a bridge to connection or only deeper ruptures?
4. What do you imagine to be the future for Tom and Sarah? Do they return to a state of contented marriage, or is their relationship irreparably broken?
5. What is the role of fear as a driving force throughout the novel? Which characters are the most afraid? What are they really scared of?



THE HEART OF IT ALL

6. Poverty and unemployment are rife throughout the small town and each character is plagued on some level with financial struggles. Those with the most difficulty—Sam and Amy, Kent’s family—are those with the most extreme and harmful views. How do these financial differences impact the social positions of characters and their beliefs? What does this suggest about the interaction between economics and isolation?
7. The town plays a large role in the personal histories of certain characters. Does having roots somewhere make a person entitled to the place? What does the depiction of the town say about who belongs to which communities and how are those communities formed and their mores enforced?
8. From Sarah’s removed emotional state, Khalid’s ignorance of Rashid’s troubles, Mary Lou’s emotionally abusive mother, to Kent’s physically abusive home, the novel contains several examples of the emotional and physical harm parents can inflict on their children. Why do you think Kiefer made this a central theme? How does it relate to other ideas explored in the novel?
9. *The Heart of it All* follows several families of multiple generations. What do these families represent in terms of American society in general? How do their fates embody the economic and social changes that have occurred over the last century? Are the youngest members trapped by these changes?
10. Does Khalid’s view of his father change after Rafia reveals his parent’s financial struggles? How has his father impacted his views of masculinity and responsibility? Does this change after the revelation?
11. Consider the end of Part 3: “The hills rising away in all directions, the continent around them, sea to shining sea. And there they were at the heart of it all: himself, and just ahead, his father and his son, the two of them laughing ... Khalid knew he would remember this moment all his life.” In what ways do the allusions to nature and physicality relate to the novel as a whole?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian Kiefer has a PhD in American literature from the University of California–Davis and directs the low-residency MFA at Ashland University. He is the author of three novels: *The Infinite Tides*, *The Animals*, and most recently *Phantoms* which was one of Kirkus Reviews and BBC’s Best Books of 2019. He lives with his family in Placer County, California.

MORE TO DISCOVER

Find more resources for your book club at www.mhpbooks.com.

