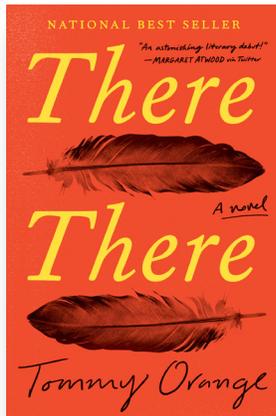


## DISCUSSION GUIDE: *THERE THERE*



The introduction, author biography, discussion questions, and suggested reading that follow are designed to enhance your group's discussion of *There There*, the stunning debut novel by Tommy Orange.

### CATEGORIES:

Comparative Literature: American | Native American Fiction  
American Literature | 21st Century  
American Literature | Native American  
Race and Ethnic Studies | Native American Literature and Drama  
First-Year Experience | Common Reading

Knopf | Cloth | 978-0-525-52037-5 | 480 pages | \$25.95

### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

***THERE THERE*** is a relentlessly paced multi-generational story about violence and recovery, memory and identity, and the beauty and despair woven into the history of a nation and its people. It tells the story of twelve characters, each of whom have private reasons for traveling to the Big Oakland Powwow. Jacque Red Feather is newly sober and trying to make it back to the family she left behind in shame. Dene Oxendene is pulling his life back together after his uncle's death and has come to work at the powwow to honor his uncle's memory. Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield has come to watch her nephew Orvil, who has taught himself traditional Indian dance through YouTube videos and has come to the powwow to dance in public for the very first time. There will be glorious communion, and a spectacle of sacred tradition and pageantry. And there will be sacrifice, and heroism, and unspeakable loss.

Here is a voice we have never heard—a voice full of poetry and rage, exploding onto the page with stunning urgency and force. Tommy Orange writes of the plight of the urban Native American, the Native American in the city, in a stunning novel that grapples with a complex and painful history, with an inheritance of beauty and profound spirituality, and with a plague of addiction, abuse, and suicide. An unforgettable debut, destined to become required reading in schools and universities across the country.

**WINNER** | 2018 | Center for Fiction First Novel Prize

**LONGLIST** | 2018 | Aspen Words Literary Prize

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**TOMMY ORANGE** is a recent graduate from the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. He is a 2014 MacDowell Fellow, and a 2016 Writing by Writers Fellow. He is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. He was born and raised in Oakland, California, and currently lives in Angels Camp, California.



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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

**ONE:** The prologue of *There There* provides a historical overview of how Native populations were systematically stripped of their identity, their rights, their land, and, in some cases, their very existence by colonialist forces in America. How did reading this section make you feel? How does the prologue set the tone for the reader? Discuss the use of the Indian head as iconography. How does this relate to the erasure of Native identity in American culture?

**TWO:** Discuss the development of the “Urban Indian” identity and ownership of that label. How does it relate to the push for assimilation by the United States government? How do the characters in *There There* navigate this modern form of identity alongside their ancestral roots?

**THREE:** Consider the following statement from page 9: “We stayed because the city sounds like a war, and you can’t leave a war once you’ve been, you can only keep it at bay.” In what ways does the historical precedent for violent removal of Native populations filter into the modern era? How does violence—both internal and external—appear throughout the narrative?

**FOUR:** On page 7, Orange states: “We’ve been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and current state as a people.” Discuss this statement in relation to how Native populations have been defined in popular culture. How do the characters in *There There* resist the simplification and flattening of their cultural identity? Relate the idea of preserving cultural identity to Dene Oxendene’s storytelling mission.

**FIVE:** Tony Loneman’s perspective both opens and closes *There There*. Why do you think Orange made this choice for the narrative? What does Loneman’s perspective reveal about the “Urban Indian” identity? About the landscape of Oakland?

**SIX:** When readers are first introduced to Dene Oxendene, we learn of his impulse to tag various spots around the city. How did you interpret this act? How does graffiti culture work to recontextualize public spaces?

**SEVEN:** Discuss the interaction between Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and Two Shoes that occurs on pages 50–52. How does Opal view Two Shoes’s “Indianness”? What is the import of the Teddy Roosevelt anecdote that he shares with her? How does this relate to the overall theme of narrative and authenticity that occurs throughout *There There*?

**EIGHT:** Describe the resettlement efforts at Alcatraz. What are the goals for inhabiting this land? What vision does Opal and Jacquie’s mother have for her family in moving to Alcatraz?

**NINE:** On page 58, Opal’s mother tells her that she needs to honor her people “by living right, by telling our stories. [That] the world was made of stories, nothing else, and stories about stories.” How does this emphasis on storytelling function throughout *There There*? Consider the relationship between storytelling and power. How does storytelling allow for diverse narratives to emerge? What is the relationship between storytelling and historical memory?

**TEN:** On page 77, Edwin Black asserts, “The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it’s stuck in the past.” How does the tension between modernity and tradition emerge throughout the narrative? Which characters seek to find a balance between honoring the past and looking toward the future? When is the attempt to do so successful?

**ELEVEN:** Discuss the generational attitudes toward spirituality in the Native community in *There There*. Which characters embrace their elders’ spiritual practices? Who doubts the efficacy of those efforts? How did you interpret the incident of Orvil and the spider legs?

**TWELVE:** How is the city of Oakland characterized in the novel? How does the city’s gentrification affect the novel’s characters? Their attitudes toward home and stability?

**THIRTEEN:** How is femininity depicted in *There There*? What roles do the female characters assume in their community? Within their families?

**FOURTEEN:** Discuss Orvil’s choice to participate in the powwow. What attracts him to the event? Why does Opal initially reject his interest in “Indianness”? How do his brothers react to it?

**FIFTEEN:** Discuss the Interlude that occurs on pages 134–41. What is the import of this section? How does it provide key contextual information for the Big Oakland PowWow that occurs at the end of the novel? What is the significance of this event and others like it for the Native community?

**SIXTEEN:** Examine the structure of *There There*. Why do you think Orange chose to present his narrative using different voices and different perspectives? How do the interlude and the prologue help to bolster the themes of the narrative? What was the most surprising element of the novel to you? What was its moment of greatest impact?

**SUGGESTED READING:**

*War Dances* by Sherman Alexie

*The Round House* by Louise Erdrich

*Fools Crow* by James Welch

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