

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Tommy Orange was born and raised in Oakland, California. He is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. Tommy currently teaches at the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. *There There* is his first novel.

- [Author's website](#)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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.

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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*?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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?
13. How is femininity depicted in *There There*? What roles do the female characters assume in their community? Within their families?
14. 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?
15. 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?

16. 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?

- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/563403/there-there-by-tommy-orange/9780525436140/readers-guide/>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

*/\* Starred Review \*/* The at-first disconnected characters from whose perspectives Orange voices his symphonic debut are united by the upcoming Big Oakland Powwow. Some have been working on the event for months; some will sneak in with only good intentions, while others are plotting to steal the sizable cash prizes. Creative interludes from an omniscient narrator describe, for example, the names of First Nations people or what it means to be an Urban Indian: “We ride buses, trains, and cars across, over, and under concrete plains. Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere.” Opal recalls occupying Alcatraz as a child with her family; today she raises her sister’s grandchildren as her own after their unspeakable loss. With grant support, Dene endeavors to complete the oral-history project his deceased uncle couldn’t, recording the stories of Indians living in Oakland. In his thirties, with his white mother’s blessing, Edwin reaches out to the Native father he never met. While anticipation of the powwow provides a baseline of suspense, the path Orange lights through these and his novel’s many other stories thrills on its own. Engrossing at its most granular, in characters’ thoughts and fleeting moments, *There There* introduces an exciting voice. -- Bostrom, Annie (Reviewed 5/1/2018) (Booklist, vol 114, number 17, p64).

### Publisher’s Weekly

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Orange’s commanding debut chronicles contemporary Native Americans in Oakland, as their lives collide in the days leading up to the city’s inaugural Big Oakland Powwow. Bouncing between voices and points of view, Orange introduces 12 characters, their plotlines hinging on things like 3-D–printed handguns and VR-controlled drones. Tony Loneman and Octavio Gomez see the powwow as an opportunity to pay off drug debts via a brazen robbery. Others, like Edwin Black and Orvil Red Feather, view the gathering as a way to connect with ancestry and, in Edwin’s case, to meet his father for the first time. Blue, who was given up for adoption, travels to Oklahoma in an attempt to learn about her family, only to return to Oakland as the powwow’s coordinator. Orvil’s grandmother, Jacquie, who abandoned her family years earlier, reappears in the city with powwow emcee Harvey, whom she briefly dated when the duo lived on Alcatraz Island as adolescents. Time and again, the city is a magnet for these individuals. The propulsion of both the overall narrative and its players are breathtaking as Orange unpacks how decisions of the past mold the present, resulting in a haunting and gripping story. Agent: Nicole Aragi, Aragi Inc. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 04/02/2018) (Publishers Weekly, vol 265, issue 14, p).

### Library Journal

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Orange's visceral first novel, set in past and present-day Oakland, weaves more than ten plot lines involving the lives of Native Americans. All intersect in a crescendo of violence at the Oakland Powwow. Tony Loneman starts off the narrative with an honest discussion of his fetal alcohol syndrome, which he calls "the Drome." He also features in the conclusion piloting a drone. Video artist Dene Oxendene records stories while Orvil Red Feather is a dancer. Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and her sister Jacquie Red Feather are most central to the novel.

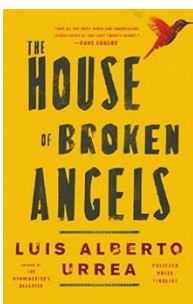
Jacque and Opal were part of the historic occupation of Alcatraz—where Jacque became pregnant—eventually giving up her daughter for a blind adoption. A chronicle of domestic violence, alcoholism, addiction, and pain, the book reveals the perseverance and spirit of the characters; from Jacque as a substance abuse counselor ten days sober to the plight of Blue, the daughter she gave up, escaping from an abusive relationship. VERDICT This book provides a broad sweep of lives of Native American people in Oakland and beyond. Echoes of Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* meets the unflinching candor of Sherman Alexie's oeuvre; highly recommended. [See Prepub Alert, 12/11/17.] --Henry Bankhead (Reviewed 04/01/2018) (Library Journal, vol 143, issue 6, p68).

### Kirkus Reviews

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Orange's debut novel offers a kaleidoscopic look at Native American life in Oakland, California, through the experiences and perspectives of 12 characters. An aspiring documentary filmmaker, a young man who has taught himself traditional dance by watching YouTube, another lost in the bulk of his enormous body—these are just a few of the point-of-view characters in this astonishingly wide-ranging book, which culminates with an event called the Big Oakland Powwow. Orange, who grew up in the East Bay, knows the territory, but this is no work of social anthropology; rather, it is a deep dive into the fractured diaspora of a community that remains, in many ways, invisible to many outside of it. "We made powwows because we needed a place to be together," he writes. "Something intertribal, something old, something to make us money, something we could work toward, for our jewelry, our songs, our dances, our drum." The plot of the book is almost impossible to encapsulate, but that's part of its power. At the same time, the narrative moves forward with propulsive force. The stakes are high: For Jacque Red Feather, on her way to meet her three grandsons for the first time,, there is nothing as conditional as sobriety: "She was sober again," Orange tells us, "and ten days is the same as a year when you want to drink all the time." For Daniel Gonzales, creating plastic guns on a 3-D printer, the only lifeline is his dead brother, Manny, to whom he writes at a ghostly Gmail account. In its portrayal of so-called "Urban Indians," the novel recalls David Treuer's *The Hiawatha*, but the range, the vision, is all its own. What Orange is saying is that, like all people, Native Americans don't share a single identity; theirs is a multifaceted landscape, made more so by the sins, the weight, of history. That some of these sins belong to the characters alone should go without saying, a point Orange makes explicit in the novel's stunning, brutal denouement. "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them," James Baldwin wrote in a line Orange borrows as an epigraph to one of the book's sections; this is the inescapable fate of every individual here. In this vivid and moving book, Orange articulates the challenges and complexities not only of Native Americans, but also of America itself. (Kirkus Reviews, April 1, 2018).

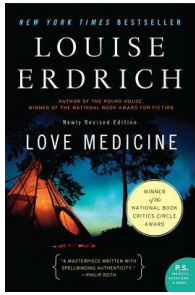
## READALIKES

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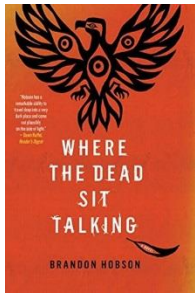
### ***The House of Broken Angels* by Luis Alberto Urrea**

Across one bittersweet weekend in their San Diego neighborhood, revelers mingle among the palm trees and cacti, celebrating the lives of family patriarch Miguel "Big Angel" De La Cruz and his mother, and recounting the many tales that have passed into family lore.



***Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich**

Expanded to include previously unpublished chapters, this collection of interrelated stories of love, betrayal, mystery, and madness concerns men and women bound by blood, legend, tradition, and need.



***Where the Dead Sit Talking* by Brandon Hobson**

With his single mother in jail, Sequoyah, a fifteen-year-old Cherokee boy, is placed in foster care with the Troutt family, where he keeps mostly to himself, living with his emotions pressed deep below the surface. At least until he meets seventeen-year-old Rosemary, another youth staying with the Troutts.