

Speak of the Devil

MEET

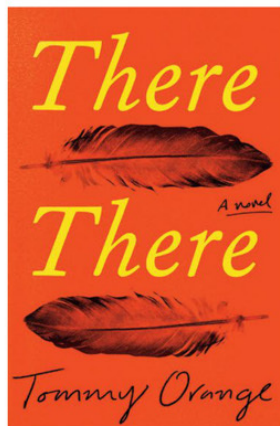
Native Son

With his critically lauded debut novel, Oakland-bred Tommy Orange illuminates the rarely chronicled experiences of urban Native Americans.

BY LINDA LENHOFF

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Author Tommy Orange burst onto the literary scene last month with his powerful first novel, *There There*, a tender but unflinching story about Native American city dwellers—a subject rarely explored. Set in Oakland, Orange's multigenerational tale delves into its characters' struggles as they question who they are and where they're from. Their lives merge—



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Tommy Orange is currently working on two novels and a short-story collection.

and the novel explodes—at a heartbreaking fictional Oakland Coliseum powwow.

With writing that combines humor, action, and profound empathy, *There There* landed Orange a major book deal from Knopf with a sizable print run. He graduated from the Institute of American Indian Arts MFA program, where he now teaches, and is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma.

Diablo talked to Orange about his East Bay roots and the significance of writing about the urban Native American experience.

Q: Why did you set your first novel in Oakland?

A: I was born and raised in Oakland. On my mom's side, we go back two generations there. I worked for eight years in [Oakland], including at the Native American Health Center. I also did a storytelling project, where I heard a lot of Native American Oakland stories. But I noticed there was not much writing set in Oakland—and not

much about urban Natives at all. ... Part of literature, for me, is to make us feel less lonely and to help with empathy building—to make us more empathetic to others' experiences.

Q: Why did you decide to have multiple characters narrate the chapters?

A: The initial impulse was just liking it in other books. ... Also, coming from a community that felt voiceless in the larger scheme of things—as far as movies and literature, as far as representation goes—it felt like the right decision to have a whole bunch of voices come out, as opposed to one or two.

Q: We sensed a subtle “man versus machine” subtheme. What were you going for?

A: Definitely one of the things that Native people struggle against is being considered past tense. ... We've needed an update on how we think of Native people for a long time. It felt like, if I'm writing



Tommy Orange: 30-Second Bio

Age: 36

Raised: In Oakland's Dimond District.

Current hometown: Angels Camp, where he lives with his wife and young son.

Current hobbies: Piano composition and guitar (Orange has a B.S. in sound arts); running.

Previous hobby: Roller hockey. “In the '90s, there was a professional team that played at the Coliseum called The Skates, and we used to go to games. We started playing on the street; then an indoor rink near the Oakland airport opened up. I was a competitive tournament-level player from the age of 15 to 24.”

Favorite place in Oakland: Lake Merritt.

Favorite place to write: In a hotel room.

Tips for aspiring writers:

“Write as much as you possibly can—when you feel awful; when you feel good; when you hate yourself, or your writing, or both; when you don't think what you're working on is worth anything. When you can't write, revise. Read your work out loud.”

something that takes place now-ish, it would be almost tone deaf to not include our relationship with technology. It's something that's going to get more intense as we move toward this scary future.

ELENA SEIBERT