BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

Douglas County Libraries

Wandering Stars
by Tommy Orange

Look inside for

Discussion Questions

Author Interview/Biography

Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. In the prologue, Tommy Orange discusses a history of colonial violence and assimilation. In what ways does this lay the foundation for the rest of the novel?

2. While Jude Star is at Fort Marion, he talks about white visitors coming to see them “perform being Indian.” How do we see the commodification and fetishization of Native people represented throughout the book?

3. There are many instances where names and the significance of those names are discussed in the narrative. What is the importance of names as they tie into identity, culture and assimilation? What does it mean for a character to change their name?

4. In chapter 2, Jude describes being on a train and riding past piles of buffalo bones, and in the narrative he states, “Every buffalo dead was an Indian gone.” What is the significance of that statement? In what other ways have settlers tried to colonize Native people?

5. The story begins with Jude and then unfolds across seven generations into the present, ending with baby Opal. Why is it important that the story is told through multiple generations in one family? How does this novel connect to the Seventh Generation Principle?

6. How do identity and community affect healing? How do we see this represented in the novel?

7. In what ways does colonization affect a parent’s or grandparent’s relationship with their children and grandchildren? Name examples from the book.

8. What is the significance of Opal giving Charles a traditional burial? How does the story shift with the end of this chapter?

9. Chapter 12 follows Victoria Bear Shield and is told in the second person. Why? What feeling does this switch invoke?

10. What effects does interracial adoption have on Native people and communities as represented in the book?

11. How do Orvil, Loother and Lony each respond to trauma? In what way is this affected by their disconnection from their Indigenous community?

12. Why did Opal keep cultural knowledge and family stories from the boys? At the end of chapter 25, Opal asks herself that question. What is the reasoning behind her shift in opinion?

13. What similarities do you see within each characters’ stories and experiences? How do they reflect the effects of intergenerational trauma?

14. Throughout the novel, dreaming is something that ties the characters together. How do the characters’ dreams reflect their emotional states?

15. Stars and birds are woven throughout the entire novel. What do they symbolize?

16. At the end of chapter 2, Jude describes how he chose his name and how struck he was by a Bible verse concerning wandering stars. Why do you think it impacted him? Why was it used for the title of the book?

Author Interview

SCOTT SIMON, HOST: Tommy Orange's new novel begins with a young man who lives through an annihilation, the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, where U.S. Army troops savagely - to invoke a word they often use to describe the human beings they slaughtered - murdered about 230 Cheyenne and Arapaho people. Jude Star is later sent to the Fort Marion prison castle in Florida, where his jailer is a devout Christian named Richard Henry Pratt, who believed Native Americans had to be forcibly shorn of their language, culture and history. He's remembered for this especially noxious quote, kill the Indian in him and save the man. The journey of Jude Star and his descendants is the story of "Wandering Stars," the second novel from Tommy Orange. His first, "There There," was a Pulitzer finalist. Tommy Orange joins us now from Oakland. Thanks so much for being with us.

TOMMY ORANGE: Thank you so much for having me.

SS: This novel is so beautifully written and so hard to read. Why did you devote six years of your life to writing it?

TO: This piece of history was not something known to me, this - as far as the historical part. I initially set out to write a more straightforward sequel, and I stumbled across this piece of history while I was in Sweden for the Swedish translation of "There There." I was at a museum, and I saw a newspaper clipping that said Southern Cheyennes in St. Augustine, Fla. And I didn't know why we would ever be in Florida and fell down this rabbit hole of information, and I didn't know how it would connect to "There There" necessarily. It was just a piece of history that I became fascinated with. And I was doing some research, and one of the books I was reading, there was a list of the prisoners. And one of the characters' names was Star, the actual prisoner, and another one was Bear Shield. And that's one of the families from "There There," one of the core families. And I realized I was going to try to write this family line.

SS: And we should explain, you're a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes and are also biracial.

TO: Correct.

SS: I wonder if seeing this story, hearing of it, put an expectation - and the success of your first novel, to be sure - all put an expectation on you.

TO: Yeah, there was - the sophomore effort is sort of doomed. And why I would take on a sequel when that's already tough to get past the sophomore effort - sequels are also sort of doomed to not be as good as the first and - but this is just what compelled me to write. And if you're going to be sitting with your work for long periods of time, you have to be pretty convinced about it. And I felt convinced

SS: I want to ask you to read a section, if I can, about an episode Star goes through. I'll just have you read it and introduce the story of a life mask.

TO: (Reading) Before we were released from the prison castle, a man came to measure our heads, to make masks of us, molds of our heads with white liquid. He called them life masks. The man wanted to compare Indian heads with white heads. He thought if Indian heads were smaller, that could explain why we were savages. I froze as the thick liquid poured over and enveloped me. It was cold and then warm and tight against

my face. It got quiet, and then it cracked. There were tubes stuck into my nose so I could breathe. I wondered if it was death the man meant by life masks. I thought maybe I was being turned into a thing for them to keep. But a head was a living thing. The face moved and changed all the time, and then I couldn't move mine anymore at all, so I thought this must be some kind of death, some kind of keeping.

SS: The novel moves ahead through generations, and then to Oakland in 2018, following a shooting at a powwow, which is in your previous novel, "There There." A young man named Orvil, who's a member of the Bear Shield Red Feather family, has been shot. What brings these events together as you construct it?

TO: Well, Orvil's story in a way echoes his ancestor, Jude Star. It's a young man running away from a massacre and essentially trying to recover from what that means and sort of a harrowing thing that he has to go through, to be shot while dancing in full regalia. It's a lot for him to handle.

SS: And addictions run through these generations, too, don't they?

TO: They do. There's alcohol, laudanum. And then in the midst of this opioid crisis, Orvil gets addicted to painkillers.

SS: I want to ask you about your book's dedication, for everyone surviving and not surviving this thing called and not called addiction. First, may I ask, were you thinking of people you know?

TO: Yeah. Yeah, my life has been shaped and mangled by addiction. I've had my own struggles, and everybody in my family has, so it's just been a big part of my life. And my heart goes out to people that suffer from this thing 'cause it's tough, and, you know, this whole country is facing it right now.

SS: How did you begin writing? I mean, I've read you were working at a bookstore.

TO: Yeah, I was moving the entire fiction section from the back of the store more toward the front. It was a bookstore like they don't exist anymore - huge and dusty and didn't get very many customers. Because we didn't get very many customers, I could just read for the first time. I had never - you know, I skimmed through novels in high school to pass tests, but I never really understood what fiction could do. And so, you know, soon after I became a reader, I decided I wanted to try writing and spent many years just doing that privately while I worked, just all my free time putting it toward reading and writing as much as I could 'cause I felt like I needed to catch up.

SS: I'm struck by a line that Orvil's brother utters, speaking of Cheyenne and Arapaho. Everyone only thinks we're from the past, but then we're here. But they don't know we're still here. What does that feel like?

TO: You know, it's an exciting time right now for representation. Most people in this country don't understand what it's like to never be seen, to never be represented in popular culture, or if you are, it's a misrepresentation. Our educational institutions almost exclusively teach the Indian, the Native person, as it relates to pilgrims one month out of the year, or maybe just one week. So it's - I think it's a really exciting time, but it has felt lonely. And it's a big part of American history, and for that to be omitted all this time, it does something to you. I'm not sure if I could spell it out entirely. You know, it's part of why I write novels, 'cause I can think and process quite a bit on the page.

SS: Tommy Orange - his novel, "Wandering Stars" - thanks so much for speaking with us.

TO: Thank you, Scott.

Author Biography

TOMMY ORANGE is a graduate of the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. An enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, he was born and raised in Oakland, California. His first book, There There, was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize and received the 2019 American Book Award. He lives in Oakland, California.

https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/2156371/tommy-orange/

Tommy Orange's 'There There' Sequel Is a Towering Achievement

"Wandering Stars" considers the fallout of colonization and the forced assimilation of Native Americans.

by Jonathan Escoffery

Tommy Orange triumphantly returns with "Wandering Stars," the follow-up to his groundbreaking 2018 debut, "There There." Part prequel, part sequel, yet wholly standing on its own, Orange's novel follows the descendants of Jude Star, a Cheyenne survivor of the 1864 Sand Creek massacre, for more than a century and a half, before catching up with the present day and landing in the aftermath of the first book's harrowing climax.

The novel begins with an address on the American government's multipronged campaign to eliminate the original "inhabitants of these American lands." One such campaign came with the slogan "Kill the Indian, Save the Man," Orange tells us, referring to the boarding schools where Indigenous children were forced to suffer all manners of torture in the name of assimilation.

But, Orange continues, "all the Indian children who were ever Indian children never stopped being Indian children … whose Indian children went on to have Indian children." In spite of the calculated terror, and the incalculable loss, the government's campaign failed and could only ever fail. This framing is part of what's so special about this book: As we move through generations of the family — as Stars become Bear Shields, who become Red Feathers — and even as knowledge of their histories and customs becomes muddled or lost to time and tragedy, Jude Star's lineage, and that of his people, remains unbroken.

Still, when the novel enters the 21st century, members of the Red Feather family lament society's apparent refusal to see Native Americans as existing in the present day. While watching an Avengers movie, Lony, the youngest of the Red Feather brothers, imagines what powers a Native American superhero would have. He makes a list that includes "Can Fly (because feathers)" and "Invisibility (because no one knows we're still here)."

Orange expands his focus on identity to consider the fraught relationship between race and blood. We hear from a high school student named Sean Price, an adoptee raised by white parents, who has just received the results of his DNA test. "He'd already assumed he was part Black," Orange writes. "There was no mistaking the look you got if you were assumed Black or part Black in a white community — whether you were or were not all or part."

Blackness, according to Sean, lies in others' assumptions and becomes most pressingly about how one is perceived and treated. The point is emphasized when Sean and another adoptee friend make a habit of riding the city bus from the Oakland hills down into predominantly Black neighborhoods, where they are unbothered, and where they can "disappear completely" from the white gaze. But given his upbringing, "Sean didn't feel he had the right to belong to any of what it might mean to be Black from Oakland."

Sean considers what to make of the DNA results, which reveal European, Native American and African ancestry, and determines that “he couldn’t pretend to now be Native American, not white either, but he would continue to be considered Black, holding the knowledge of his Native American heritage out in front of him like an empty bowl.” Data about his ancestry alone isn’t enough to allow him to feel he can claim it.

Later, Sean seeks guidance from his schoolmate Orvil Red Feather, asking, “So, like, can I say Indian?,” to which Orvil responds, “If you’re Indian.” The novel does not include the percentages that typically accompany these DNA test results, perhaps to dissuade readers from attempting to construct Sean’s identity on his behalf. It’s as if Orange is saying, *You* can’t decide this for Sean.

It’d be a mistake to think that the power of “Wandering Stars” lies solely in its astute observations, cultural commentary or historical reclamations, though these aspects of the novel would make reading it very much worthwhile. But make no mistake, this book has action! Suspense! The characters are fully formed and they get going right out of the gate. Our first moments with Jude Star are heart-pounding, and our final moments with him, as we find him on the cusp of a decision that will forever change his family’s fate, will make you want to scream “Don’t do it!” The fact that you’ll want to scream “Do it!” just as strongly speaks to the power of Orange’s storytelling abilities.

“There There” fans will be happy to see the return of the half sisters Jacquie and Opal, and to have questions from Orange’s first novel answered. Will the once-estranged Jacquie stick around to help raise her grandsons? Will she relapse again? What led her to run away and leave Opal behind in her teenage years?

As the fallout of colonization and forced assimilation takes its toll on the family, its most definitive impact is addiction. Jude battles alcoholism and, like a family curse, addiction wends its way through his descendants, reaching even the youngest generation of Red Feathers. Sean and Orvil become fast friends, having in common dead mothers, recent hospitalizations and a growing desire to sustain the high they experience via the painkillers they were prescribed for their respective injuries. Add to the boys’ blossoming addictions the fact that Sean’s adoptive father has become a drug dealer and manufacturer with a seemingly endless supply of pain pills on hand, and the friendship becomes a powder keg. It would be easy to reduce this friendship to its toxic elements, but the boys also share a love for musical instruments and a brotherly love for each other that’s difficult to root against.

Orange’s ability to highlight the contradictory forces that coexist within friendships, familial relationships and the characters themselves, who contend with holding private and public identities, makes “Wandering Stars” a towering achievement.

Jonathan Escoffery is the author of the linked story collection “If I Survive You,” which was nominated for the 2022 National Book Award and a finalist for the 2023 Booker Prize.

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/books/review/tommy-orange-wandering-stars.html