



***There There*, by Tommy Orange**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, April 2019

Tommy Orange's impressive debut novel *There There* centers around Native Americans converging for a powwow in Oakland. The book's title is taken from Gertrude Stein's often quoted remark about her late 19th century Oakland childhood: "There is no there there."

Mr. Orange, a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, depicts an Oakland that is a vibrant cultural mix, welcoming to Native Americans. "Urban Indians belong to the city and cities belong to the earth," he writes "We came to know the redwoods in Oakland Hills better than any other deep wild forest. Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere."

Each chapter in *There There* features a character who is coming to the Big Oakland Powwow. Dene Oxendene, applying for a cultural arts grant to make a documentary about urban Natives, tells the grant judges, "I want to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience." With the grant money, Dene plans to set up a booth at the powwow where he'll conduct his interviews.

Blue, the powwow's event planner, had been adopted as an infant by a white couple who had named her Crystal. Now in her early 40s, Blue hopes to find her Native birth parents at the powwow. She and Edwin Black, who wants to connect with his estranged father, will award gift-card prizes to winners at the powwow.

Teenage Orvil Red Feather is hoping to compete in the powwow's dance contest, and he encourages his two younger brothers to sneak out and join him. Lony, the youngest brother asks Orvil why Natives continue to dress up, dance, and sing Indian. "We gotta carry on," Orvil replies. "If we don't, people will forget."

The Red Feather boys are the grandsons of Jacquie, who now lives in New Mexico. In the early 1970s, Jacquie and her sister Opal had as children lived with their mother at Alcatraz during the Native American protest occupation. Opal, now

raising the boys in Oakland, is unaware that Jacquie is coming to the Big Oakland Powwow.

Thomas Frank, whose habitual drunkenness had gotten him fired, is going to the powwow to drum and hopes to win a prize. The son of a white mother and a Native father, Thomas is "from a people who took and took and took. And from a people taken. He is both and neither."

Soon word on the street about the huge prize payoff, however, generates darker motives for attending the powwow. Blue and Edwin, carrying a safe full of prize gift cards, enter the coliseum with uneasy feelings. Despite the spirited gaiety of the powwow, others also sense that something is amiss. As *There There* reaches its powerful conclusion, one character's courageous act becomes the poignant coda of an unforgettable novel.