

English 11 - Summer Reading Guide

There There by Tommy Orange

Tommy Orange's wondrous and shattering novel follows twelve characters from Native communities: all traveling to the Big Oakland Powwow, all connected to one another in ways they may not yet realize. Among them is Jacquie Red Feather, newly sober and trying to make it back to the family she left behind. Dene Oxendene, pulling his life together after his uncle's death and working at the powwow to honor his memory. Fourteen-year-old Orvil, coming to perform traditional dance for the very first time. Together, this chorus of voices tells of the plight of the urban Native American--grappling with a complex and painful history, with an inheritance of beauty and spirituality, with communion and sacrifice and heroism.

1. *There There* starts with a prologue: a nonfiction essay about the Native American experience. Similarly, there's a nonfiction interlude on pages 134–141. Why do you think the author opened with this prologue and included the interlude? And how did it inform your reading of the novel?
2. Why do you think Orange chose to tell this story from so many different perspectives? And why were some told from a first person perspective while others were third person? Was it ever challenging to follow so many storylines before they began to converge?
3. Of the 12 central characters the novel follows, were there some storylines that you enjoyed or cared about more than the others? If so, what about those characters made their story stand out?
4. What role does substance abuse play in the novel? Why does it seem to be such a common experience for so many of the Native characters?
5. Spiders are referenced throughout the novel and seem to be an important motif. What do spiders represent for these characters, and why does Tommy Orange keep returning to the images of spiders? From tattoos of spiderwebs to finding spider legs inside of you, what does it all mean?
6. Throughout this story, all of the characters wrestle in one way or another with what it means to be Native American. What conclusions do they come to by the end of the novel? Do these characters reach similar conclusions, or do they all seem to have very different conceptions of their identities as Native Americans in the end?
7. In what ways is violence an important theme in this story, and what is Tommy Orange trying to say about violence? How did you feel about the violence at the end of the story when characters converge at the pow wow? What was the purpose of having everyone's story culminate in this way?
8. On pages 38-39, there is a discussion of a Gertrude Stein quote regarding Oakland: "There is no there there." What is the significance of setting for the story? Seeing as this quote contains the title of the novel, how does this passage express or relate to its major themes?