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Cheyenne / Arapaho Novelist Tommy Orange

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Cheyenne/Arapaho Novelist TOMMY ORANGE

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD



SPORTS WERE Tommy Orange's first passion, but when the Oakland-born author turned 18, he dove into music. Yet after earning a sound engineering degree from community college, fate intervened when he took a job at Gray Wolf Books, the now-defunct used books store in San Leandro, California. There his interest in literature was sparked, and he soon pursued an MFA degree in writing from the Institute of American Indian Arts.

Orange's debut novel, *There There* (2018) rocketed to the number one spot on *The San Francisco Chronicle* best-seller list and quickly joined *The New York Times* bestseller list. The gritty multivoiced fictional account of Native people in the Bay Area received critical praise and recognition, from the John Leonard Prize and PEN/Hemingway

Award to an American Book Award. The novel also garnered him several prestigious award nominations including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

MRS: Thank you for speaking with me, Tommy. I've read that you started writing later in life, but you've been involved in music for many years. This creative impulse towards writing songs and writing short stories and novels seems so closely related, no?

TO: I started playing guitar when I was 18 and that was my first serious creative impulse or endeavor. My mom and sister got me a guitar for my 18th birthday. I didn't even ask for it, but they must have sensed something. I was mostly an athlete, and so I didn't do well in school. That

being said, when I did start writing, and to this day, there is a lot of musical influence.

I was just reading a book written by Chilly Gonzales. He's a pianist. He's also a producer and a rapper. He's a character. He wrote a book on Enya, the Irish singer, called *Enya: A Treatise on Unguilty Pleasures*. It's a 50-page book. He's a brilliant musician. He starts the book talking about lullabies and musical taste and how he, for a long time, tried to prove himself as being cool by listening to the most hip music and doing all that kind of stuff. He talks about musical influences, taste, and aesthetics—which is why children love lullabies and people love pop music—this natural impulse towards aesthetics.

I was just thinking recently about losing the ability to really tap into that natural impulse towards whatever you are doing, aesthetics, etc. We did grow up with a piano in the house, and I did have one singular moment when no one was around. The left third of the keyboard on the piano, maybe for like an hour—I was really experimenting with sound for the first time doing some kind of musical thing. It really made an impression on me, but I just sort of compartmentalized that experience as singular and left it there and did nothing with it until I really got into piano when I was 21.

MRS: When you're writing, what frustrates you? Or, better yet, what do you have to work harder on than anything else?

TO: I think it's a pretty painful practice to continue to go back to your words and your decisions on the page and make the commitment to dig back into every paragraph and every decision you've made knowing full well that, between time itself and revision, you can make it better. You have to because that's the job, but looking



back at the words on a daily basis, it's a painful process.

I play piano regularly, and when I go to the keyboard and play, I don't have anything I'm trying to do. I just play whatever comes, or I have a certain set of songs that I've memorized that I go to. There's nothing painful about it, but I also don't have any ambition towards making something.

I'm working on a new novel now. I sort of know in my head a lot of what needs to happen, but to approach the page—not so much the new writing which I enjoy doing, making new drafts—but the early and middle drafts, getting them to where they need to be is a painful process of having to really examine what is and what isn't working about your own work.

MRS: Can you expand on this further: how important is revision and editing to your writing process?

TO: I think revision is everything. If I have an idea and I'm trying it out for the

first time—if it's a scene or the beginning of a chapter, and I get some insight into something, say while I'm on a run, I take a note. Then I try it for the first time and I think it's great for the first 24 hours after I've written it. Then I have to slog through the revisions to get to it when I can. So the way I think of revision is really about reseeing your own work in a fresh way to get a new perspective on it. I have a lot of techniques to be able to get a fresh perspective. Time will always give you a fresh perspective, but if you want to meet a deadline or want to finish a book in under a decade, you can't depend on a fresh perspective that time gives you. So, I try to find all different ways to resee my own work.

I have a robot app that reads my work to me, and sometimes I'll go for a drive and have the robot read my work on the drive, and I can't really do anything to it while I'm listening to it, because I'm driving and it's dangerous. I really go through the process of having to deal with

ABOVE Carlin Bear Don't Walk (Northern Cheyenne/Crow), *Storyteller*, 2020, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE Tommy Orange. Photo: Kateri Chui Orange. Image courtesy of the author.

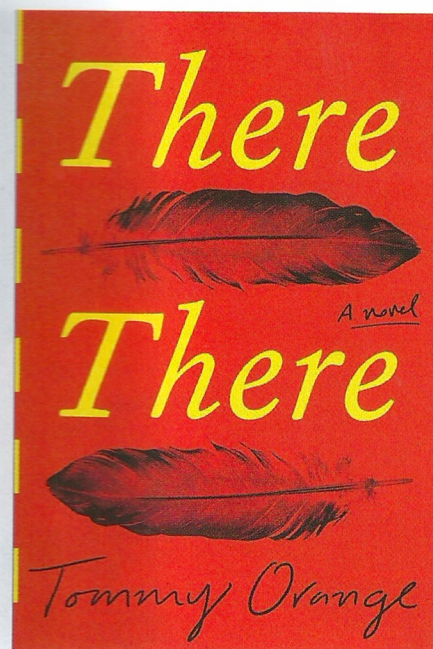


ABOVE, LEFT Carlin Bear *Don't Walk (Northern Cheyenne/Crow), Cold As Ice*, 2019, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Innocence is forgotten when vengeance is necessary. Those words embody the meaning behind this art and define the heart and strength of our Indigenous Women. I always want my art to represent that strength to inspire others, uplift, heal, and motivate. Also, to remind those of their ancestors and what they endured, the resilience they displayed so future generations could exist and carry on the honor of their name.

—Carlin Bear *Don't Walk*

ABOVE, RIGHT Cover of Tommy Orange's *There There* (McClelland & Stewart, 2018).



second book that I'm working on—I'm doing things that I'm really loving, and I think they are more mature decisions, and the work is deeper because I've been at it longer. But that's just book number two in the lifetime of a writer.

A lot of times when I look back at the writers that I like, books number one and two aren't very good. So, I let myself off the hook that way. I try to get the work finished because you can mull over it and put things off for a long time, but you have to decide that something is finished enough.

Even though I started really late, I was taking writing pretty seriously from 2006 to now. It is late but I was going at it pretty hard for 14 years with serious intent. If you look at putting in hours at any discipline, if you go at something for that long, you are more familiar with the process and your relation with the art and what it all means.

MRS: Finally, I learned that the sequel to *There There* is being released in 2022. What can readers expect from this book? How will it differ from *There There*?

TO: When I first started writing it was right after the powwow, really like directly after the powwow, which was my initial instinct. It's really changed. I sold the book in February of 2020, right before the pandemic. I finished a draft during it, and

errors or embarrassing things I've done and I can't touch it. That's one way to do it. My wife will read out loud to me. I'll read out loud. I'll print the work out and go at it with a pen. There's a lot of different ways to resee and revise. It's a big part of the process. To get a fresh perspective, to make it better—sentence by sentence—I think you have to employ a lot of different techniques. Long-distance running is a thing that I do to get some of the deeper solutions to problems that I have. More structural problems, I can do on the run.

MRS: Did the critical and commercial success of *There There* transform your approach to writing? How has your writing matured over the years?

TO: I've only put out one book, and I spent six years writing that novel. My



OPPOSITE Carlin Bear Don't Walk (Northern Cheyenne/Crow), *Busby Express*, 2018, oil on canvas, 24 × 48 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Dedicated to my hometown of Busby, Montana, on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Just another day in the life, things we see and get to experience firsthand growing up in my neighborhood. There's a saying back home: "No hope in the game but a tow rope and a chain," and it applies to everything we do. We improvise and make the best out of any situation because we come from a long line of survivors, and we take great pride in making things work to the best of our abilities.

—Carlin Bear Don't Walk

I got an editorial note that gave me a lot of insight. As I learned with editorial notes last time around, it's really about trying to lead you in a direction and not giving you direction, but you have to come up with all the creative solutions yourself. What I've come to I'm really happy with. I have a new deadline on March 31, and we'll see where it goes from there.

There's a whole historical component that goes back into a Spanish prison castle where General Richard Henry Pratt held more than 70 prisoners for three years. Half of those prisoners were Southern Cheyennes, which is my tribe. General Richard Henry Pratt used that experience as a blueprint for the boarding schools that were detrimental for Native people across the country. Prisoners of war were forced to learn English through the Bible and Christianity and military regimen. He saw that as the best way forward for institutionalizing education for Native children. It sounds crazy now, but back then he would have actually been considered a progressive liberal and sympathetic to Indian causes. Going back into history, while also interfacing with the characters from *There There* in a back-and-forth way, is part of what is happening in the new novel.

MRS: Thank you for this, Tommy. It's a pleasure to speak with you.

TO: Thank you, Matt.

CARLIN BEAR DON'T WALK

An enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, Carlin Bear Don't Walk is also of Apsáalooke descent. He maintains Uprising Art studio in Busby, Montana, on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Primarily self-taught, Bear Don't Walk is fearless with his saturated palette which freely uses magenta, tangerine, or violet to electrify his Northern Plains landscapes and portraits. Finding hope and persevering through adversity are the through lines in his paintings that move freely between the past, present, and future.

A dedicated father, the artist and his wife Bonnie just welcomed a new daughter into the world. He has illustrated children's and young adult books, such as *The Reluctant Storyteller* by Art Coulson (Cherokee Nation), *Wolf Cub's*

Song by Joseph Bruchac, and a forthcoming project. Children, Native and non-Native, are the intended audience for his recent mural at ZooMontana in Billings. Commissioned by the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders and the zoo, the 78-foot mural teaches the public about local Native history and current realities.

Bear Don't Walk exhibited at *Indigenous Art in Time* at Montana State University. He shows at several art markets, including Native POP in Rapid City, South Dakota, the Missoula Indigenous Art Market, and the Heard Fair in Phoenix, Arizona, where his *Flip Side of Paradise* won an award earlier this year. This August he will be exhibiting his most recent canvases at Santa Fe Indian Market booth LIN W 759.

—America Meredith
(Cherokee Nation)

CARLINBEARDONTWALK.COM