

'There There' author discusses writing process, Indigeneity

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Back in June, as summer began and the countdown to move-in day commenced, I, like the rest of the Class of 2023, received my copy of Tommy Orange's debut novel "There There" in the mail. When I pulled the paperback book out of the big envelope, the bright orange cover and yellow spine instantly struck me. Three months later, a sea of this orange and yellow flooded the Villard Room as students, faculty and community members waited for the 2019 William Starr Distinguished Lecture to begin, their own copies of the book in hand.

The Starr Lecture is an annual program designed to engage new students with published authors about important topics in fiction. The event took place this past Monday, Sept. 30, and centered around "There There," which was chosen as the first-year common reading. The story takes place in Oakland, CA and focuses on the individual stories of Native characters living in the city. These unique stories come together to shape a narrative about the urban Native community.

The event started with a short opening from Dean of First-Year Students Jennifer Herrera. She introduced the purpose of the first-year common reading, as well as the significance of the Starr Lecture. She spoke about the book and the online discussion questions that connected the new, diverse incoming class. "I think the [first-year] reading is important because it's one of the first

shared experiences our students get, even before they get to campus,” Herrera commented in an email correspondence.

The discussion ignited with an introduction from Director of American Studies Professor Molly McGlennen. Over the summer, McGlennen and three other professors developed online prompts, based on “There, There,” to spark discussions among first-year students. In her prompt, she discussed the importance of the novel’s prologue, delving into the violent history between Natives and white settlers and analyzing how Orange crafts the prologue to contextualize the rest of the story. “[Orange’s] fictional narrative illuminates the threads of history that are foundational to this land, to this place we now call the U.S., because these threads of history have often gone suppressed, hidden or perverted, or told in a way that, of course, lauds Euro-American progress and then justifies and normalizes this continued violence against Native peoples,” McGlennen said in her video prompt on the subject.

McGlennen was also on the committee that chose the first-year common reading. When asked about “There There” as a potential candidate, she eagerly promoted the novel. “I couldn’t say enough about how important this book would be for students to read—not only because it has won numerous awards, but because it tells a story rarely heard by non-Native people,” she shared in an email interview. “Every time I read this book, I find new things to love about it: for its braiding of multiple characters, voices and points of view; for its pertinent prologue that grants meaningful context to the fictional narrative ahead; for its description of Oakland, a city I lived in for some 15 years before landing a job here at Vassar.”

As she spoke about the urban Native experience in her introduction, McGlennen discussed the violent truth behind white settlement in America, stating that Native America holds up a “mirror” against the settlement of this country. She expounded, “Orange’s incredible debut novel turns that mirror on his readers...It is, as I always relate to my students, yet another time a Native author is generously and lovingly inviting you into one of the many stories of indigenous America, on Native terms.” Her powerfully-written introduction launched the dialogue between Orange and Professor of English Amitava Kumar, drawing the audience into the discussion that ensued.

From the outset, the lecture took on a conversational tone, with Orange and Kumar directly engaging with the audience. The exchange tackled serious topics while also diving into Orange’s experiences with reading and writing. Orange’s discovery of reading plays a unique role in the development of his writing process. He didn’t start reading for fun until much later in life, when he got a job at a bookstore. “I reorganized where the fiction section would be, and I fell in love with fiction just from moving the books,” Orange recalled. This quip earned a ripple of laughter from the audience. Many lighthearted moments like this appeared throughout the conversation.

In the middle of the discussion, Orange read an excerpt from the novel’s prologue. Pages rustled as the audience read with him, holding onto every word he read aloud from his powerful opening. He brought the passage to life; hearing him read aloud gave the text a deeper, more personal meaning.

The dialogue that followed explored various aspects of the writing process behind “There There,” including how Orange deployed his writing to fight stereotypes about Natives. As he discussed the risks that come with creating a realistic portrayal of urban Natives, Orange addressed how he confronted harmful views of Indigenous communities: “I think leaning into these areas in new ways, structurally and formally and stylistically, is the only way to really approach it.”

Orange also revealed some of the mechanical writing practices that went into the novel. When a student asked about his research process, he explained how he used a combination of his own experiences and outside sources to shape the novel. The internet provided bountiful information; he shared, “I love being in the stage of research where, as I was saying earlier, you’re sort of seeking out things to layer and fuel your novel, and some things you have to dig to find and other things fall in your lap.”

The event ended with a book-signing. A long line of people curved around the room, everyone clutching their orange copies. As my roommate and I returned to our dorm, we reminisced about all of the wonderful elements of the lecture. “He brought the story to life, especially when he did the reading,” my roommate, Nina Ajemian ’23, said.

After three months of holding on to this book, carrying it through the conclusion of high school and into the next stage of my life (college), being at the lecture highlighted my first-year experience. The book became a point of familiarity during a time in which everything changed and unfamiliar faces surrounded me. Hearing Tommy Orange speak in person brought a sense of satisfaction and completion to my first month of orientation.