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First-Year and Common Reading Guide

Wandering Stars

Tommy Orange

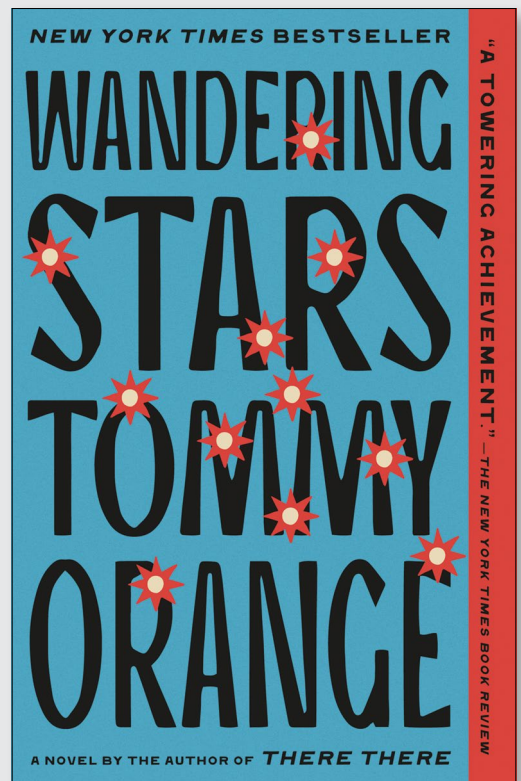
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INTRODUCTION

In *Wandering Stars*, Tommy Orange weaves a powerful narrative that follows multiple generations of Native American characters. Through his storytelling, Orange examines resilience, the lasting effects of colonization and historical trauma, and the related struggles with substance use that impact the lives of Native American people. Orange asks the reader to explore these ideas and others in this timely, thought-provoking novel, and this guide was written to assist educators and students as they engage with it. Through the questions, activities, and resources below, students are encouraged to adopt an analytical view of *Wandering Stars* and its related topics. In addition to this Introduction, this guide has five sections: Discussion Questions, Classroom Activities, Research Opportunities, Service-Learning Projects, and Other Resources for Students, Educators, and Programs. Each section applies to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First-Year Experience (FYE®); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE®: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. Why do you think Tommy Orange selected quotations from Richard Henry Pratt and Theodore Roosevelt as epigraphs for *Wandering Stars*? How do these quotes establish tone and shape the reader's expectations?
2. "Pratt wanted to show the people what Indians could be made into. Before and after pictures was what Pratt had told us, to put them right next to each other, how we were and how we became. Civilization's pride, Pratt had said" (p. 38). How do these before-and-after portraits serve as a form of cultural genocide?
3. Based on the real-life figure, Richard Henry Pratt is a pivotal character in the novel. Several early chapters are told from his perspective, offering insight into his worldview. How did experiencing parts of the story through his eyes shape your perception of both the historical and fictional versions of Pratt?
4. *Wandering Stars* references key events, figures, and locations in Native American history, such as the Sand Creek Massacre, the Fort Marion prison castle, and the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—many of which may be unfamiliar to readers. How has the dominant historical narrative in the United States distorted, or even erased, Native American history? How does Orange use the novel to challenge these omissions?
5. "This is the memory he keeps but doesn't see, the one that lives in him, in a room he has all but abandoned" (p. 63). Many characters in *Wandering Stars* carry trauma that lingers over time, shaping their identities and relationships. What are some key examples of trauma in the novel, and how do these experiences affect characters' internal struggles and relationships with others?
6. "Take in what it means to be the children and grandchildren of massacre. You will understand another form of inheritance then. Feel it" (p. 106). How does the book explore the concept of inherited trauma? In what ways do historical violence and displacement continue to shape the lives of the novel's characters? Lastly, what cultural practices or rituals do characters turn to as they navigate the weight of generational trauma?
7. "He was looking at the ceiling, the sharp pain he'd felt that morning receding, and the slow building of a good feeling becoming in his blood a kind of flow, slow and mellow but bright, even hypnotic, like lava in those lamps . . ." (p. 120). In what ways does addiction serve as a central thread in *Wandering Stars*? How do different characters experience addiction? How do individual experiences, historical trauma, and social conditions contribute to substance use?
8. "Stories do more than comfort. They take you away and bring you back better made" (p. 35). How does the novel explore the role of storytelling as a tool for healing, resilience, and identity (re)formation? In what ways do characters use stories to heal and reclaim a sense of self? Finally, what does the novel suggest about the power of narrative in Native American communities?
9. If you have read *There There*, how does *Wandering Stars* function as both a sequel and a prequel? In what ways does it expand or reshape the narratives from the first novel? After reading *Wandering Stars*, how has your understanding of *There There* changed?
10. If you could ask Tommy Orange one question about *Wandering Stars*, what would you ask? Why?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following activities apply to a variety of curricular areas.

1. Create a Trauma Map

“A bad thing doesn’t stop happening to you just because it stops happening to you. In therapy this is called trauma” (p. 158).

Wandering Stars explores the lasting effects of trauma, showing how its impact extends beyond individuals to affect families and entire communities across generations. This activity invites students to examine these effects by creating a concept map.

To begin, ask students to select a character who experiences trauma, such as Jude Star or Orvil Red Feather. Next, have them closely analyze the character’s trauma, identifying its emotional and psychological effects. From there, students should explore how this trauma extends outward, affecting their character’s relationships with family members and the broader community. Students should also consider how these effects persist across generations. Finally, have students organize their findings into a concept map using one of the free online tools below:

- Miro (<https://miro.com/concept-map/>)
- Canva (<https://prhlink.com/canvamaps>)

Once all students have completed their maps, have them present their work and compare their findings. Use this discussion to explore how trauma—both in fiction and reality—functions as an individual and communal experience.

2. Explore Native American Communities of the Past and Present

“I got hit with this big shame then. About having grown up in a place, having called a place my home without knowing anything about its Native people, who’d lived there for thousands of years . . . I had an idea then and went straight to the library to use their computer and internet. I would become familiar with the names of the tribes from the places where I lived” (p. 300).

This activity invites students to follow Orvil’s lead by researching Native American communities—both past and present—in their area. Begin by sharing the guiding questions below. To answer them, students will likely need to consult multiple online sources, and they should prioritize those that center Native American perspectives. A key resource for this activity is the Native Land Digital map (<https://native-land.ca/>), an online resource that maps tribal territories. Whose Land (<https://www.whose.land/en/>) is an additional resource students could utilize for this activity.

Guiding Questions:

- Which tribes have historical and present-day ties to this region?
- How have history, policy, and conflict shaped Indigenous presence in this area?
- What local Native American organizations, cultural centers, or tribal governments exist today?
- How do Native American people in this region continue to practice and preserve their cultures?

After completing their local research, students can expand their exploration by choosing another region to investigate, deepening their understanding of Native American histories and contemporary communities across different geographic areas.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

3. Analyze Before and After Photographs

“... those side-by-side shots of the Indians, the before and after. There with their blankets and long hair on the left, and then again on the right with short hair and in uniform. Before and aftermath more like it” (p. 47).

In the quote above, the fictional Richard Henry Pratt references the “before and after” photographs that documented the forced assimilation of Native American children. This activity asks students to examine photographs from the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, analyzing their impact and historical significance. To begin, place students in small groups and share the following link with them: <https://prhlink.com/carlisleindian>. Ask students to review the linked images while using the questions below to guide discussion in their groups.

- What visual changes stand out in the before-and-after photos?
- Who was the intended audience, and what message were these photos meant to convey?
- How do these photographs reflect U.S. policies of assimilation and cultural erasure?
- How does seeing these images impact your perception of themes, characters, and/or events in *Wandering Stars*?

After students have viewed and discussed these images in small groups, have each group choose a spokesperson to share their group’s analysis with the rest of the class.

4. Paideia Seminar

A Paideia seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the instructor serves as a facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and connecting student comments. There are three main question categories: *opening questions*, *core questions*, and *closing questions*. *Opening questions* identify the main ideas from the text (How does Orvil’s understanding of his identity evolve throughout the novel?). *Core questions* require students to analyze textual details (How does intergenerational trauma shape the choices and behaviors of different characters?). Finally, *closing questions* personalize textual concepts (In what ways do themes from the book connect to issues facing Native American communities today?). Construct multiple questions like these and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another student’s comment, and making consistent eye contact. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the seminar. Note that many discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult the National Paideia Center’s website (<https://prhlink.com/paideia>).

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Write a research paper
- Deliver a presentation
- Design a lesson plan and teach a class
- Record a podcast (<https://prhlink.com/startapodcast>)
- Create a website (Wix <https://www.wix.com>, Canva <https://www.canva.com/website-builder/>, and Google Sites <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this.)
- Use Adobe Express (<https://www.adobe.com/express/>) to create and share a variety of graphics and videos

1. **“Native people were in recovery everywhere. Had found out that they couldn’t not take substance use to its abuse point. Had found out that some wounds were bottomless holes asking to be filled every day”** (p. 303).

As Orvil notes in the quote above, substance use has had a deep impact on Native American communities. Conduct online research to learn more about this topic, and use the following questions to guide your research: *How prevalent is substance use among Native Americans? What historical and social factors have contributed to high rates of substance use in Native American communities? What challenges do Native American people face in accessing treatment and recovery services?* As you locate sources to answer these questions, be sure to prioritize those that foreground Native American voices, such as this study: <https://prhlink.com/historicaltrauma>.

2. **“At Carlisle, they were taught that they were to become Carlisle Indians . . . As soon as they arrived at the school their long hair was cut, their clothes were taken, and new names were handed out along with military uniforms”** (p. x).

In the Prologue, Tommy Orange introduces readers to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, one of many U.S. boarding schools designed to forcibly assimilate Native American children. Research the history and impact of these schools, focusing on their role in cultural erasure and generational trauma. Learn more about the purpose of the schools, the experiences of Native American children, and the long-term effects on Native American communities. A useful starting point for this research topic is the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition’s education page (<https://prhlink.com/indianboardingschools>).

3. The novel opens with the Sand Creek Massacre, a brutal attack on the Cheyenne and Arapaho people by U.S. soldiers in 1864. Research this event, examining its causes, the role of Colonel John Chivington, and the U.S. government’s policies toward Native American nations at the time. Explore firsthand accounts (<https://prhlink.com/sandcreekstories>), perspectives from descendants of survivors (<https://prhlink.com/sandcreekdescendants>), the massacre’s immediate and long-term effects on Cheyenne and Arapaho communities, and how it is remembered today.

4. **“That was how Sean Price, given drugs for long enough to mitigate the pain, began to like getting high from the drugs, and where all the real trouble began”** (p. 133).

“I had what seemed an unlimited prescription of the almighty hydromorphone. Even the sound of the name of the pill felt like its strength, like some water monster, or like some kind of supernatural disaster” (p. 167).

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES (CONTINUED)

Sean and Orvil have much in common, including an addiction to opioids—a crisis that extends beyond fiction and deeply affects real Native American communities. Conduct online research to better understand opioids, their addictive nature, and their impact on Indigenous populations. What are the most problematic opioids, and why are they so addictive? How do social determinants of health (<https://prhlink.com/socialdeterminantshealth>) contribute to the opioid crisis in Native American communities? What policy changes are needed to address this public health emergency?

SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects connect students' learning experiences with the broader community.

1. Become an Expert and Educator

Have students select a topic related to *Wandering Stars* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- The impact of intergenerational trauma on Native American families
- The opioid crisis in Native American communities
- The lasting effects of boarding schools on Native American peoples
- Barriers to mental health care for Native American communities
- The impact of forced displacement and land loss on Native American communities

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so that they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze the applicable sections of the book while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group's topic?
2. How should others take action to impact this issue?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it informs and invites them to take action. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, flyers, or other documents. Free web resources such as Canva (<https://www.canva.com/>) or Microsoft Designer (<https://designer.microsoft.com/>) will work for this. Students could even combine the physical and the digital through QR codes on printed documents.
- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through Canva (<https://www.canva.com/presentations/>), Prezi (<https://prezi.com/>), or Powtoon (<https://www.powtoon.com/>).
- Design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and convey knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include Piktochart (<http://piktochart.com>), Easel.ly (<http://easel.ly>) and Adobe Express (<https://prhlink.com/infographic>).

Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and take action.

SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

2. Participate in Indigenous Peoples' Day

Celebrated on the second Monday of October, Indigenous Peoples' Day offers students a powerful service-learning opportunity. Invite them to participate through the activities described below.

- **Attend and Reflect on Indigenous-Led Events:** Encourage students to seek out and attend Indigenous Peoples' Day events, whether in person or online. Cultural centers and Native American organizations host speaker series, film screenings, and/or cultural performances. After attending, students can write a reflection, share key takeaways in a class discussion, or deliver a short presentation to educate their peers.
- **Volunteer with Indigenous Organizations:** Encourage students to offer their skills and time to Indigenous-led nonprofits. Activities may include assisting in event planning, tutoring, or participating in community service projects that address specific needs identified by Indigenous communities.
- **Develop Awareness Campaigns:** Students can create and implement campaigns that highlight the significance of Indigenous Peoples' Day. This may involve social media initiatives, informational booths, or art installations that educate peers about Indigenous cultures and histories.

For additional ideas, share the following resources with students:

- **Indigenous Peoples' Day Toolkit 2024 by the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition** (<https://prhlink.com/indigenouspeoplestoolkit>): This comprehensive toolkit offers resources and guidance for engaging communities in meaningful conversations centered around Indigenous Peoples' Day. It includes ready-to-use social media graphics, suggested hashtags, and educational materials.
- **"15 Calls to Action on Indigenous Peoples' Day!" by Cultural Survival** (<https://prhlink.com/indigenouspeoplesday>): This resource outlines actionable steps students can take to honor Indigenous Peoples' Day. Suggestions include attending local events, supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, utilizing media to amplify Indigenous voices, and more.

3. Raise Funds for an Indigenous-Led Organization

Invite your students to fundraise for an Indigenous-led organization that works to address issues explored in *Wandering Stars*. To initiate this activity, have students organize themselves into groups and invite them to select one of the charities described below. (Note that these are only suggestions; students can look online to locate others as well. If they do so, encourage students to vet charities through the use of <https://www.charitynavigator.org> and <http://www.guidestar.org>.):

- First Nations Development Institute (<https://www.firstnations.org/>) "improves economic conditions for Native Americans through direct financial grants, technical assistance & training, and advocacy & policy."
- The Sand Creek Massacre Foundation (<https://www.sandcreekmassacrefoundation.org/>) is "the non-profit partner of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, furthering its educational purposes and contributing to lifelong learning about the massacre."
- The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (<https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>) is "the first and only national organization whose purpose is to advocate on behalf of Native peoples impacted by U.S. Indian boarding school policies."

SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

- Partnership with Native Americans (<https://nativepartnership.org/>) is “committed to championing hope for a brighter future for Native Americans living on remote, isolated and impoverished reservations.”
- White Bison (<https://whitebison.org/>) is “dedicated to creating and sustaining a grassroots Wellbriety Movement—providing culturally-based healing to the next seven generations of Indigenous People.”

After students select a charity, ask them to plan and implement several fundraising activities to support it. To provide students with some fundraising ideas, refer them to the extensive list here: <https://prhlink.com/fundraisingideas>.

Whatever students choose to do, encourage them to promote their efforts through social media. After students conclude their fundraising efforts, have them debrief and reflect on what was successful and what could be improved.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, AND PROGRAMS

These resources are useful for extending a study of *Wandering Stars* and its related topics:

- A conversation with Tommy Orange, from the Free Library of Philadelphia (<https://prhlink.com/tommyorangefreelibrary>)
- A conversation with Tommy Orange, from Politics and Prose (<https://prhlink.com/tommyorangeconversation>)
- Tommy Orange discusses *Wandering Stars*, from *CBS Mornings* (<https://prhlink.com/tommyorangeCBS>)
- “A Primer on American Indian and Alaska Native Boarding Schools in the U.S.,” from the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (<https://prhlink.com/primerboardingschools>)
- A collection of educational resources, articles, and videos focused on Native American history, culture, and contemporary issues, from the organization Native Hope (<https://prhlink.com/nativehope>)
- A teacher’s guide from the National Endowment for the Humanities, offering lesson plans and resources on Indigenous histories and cultures (<https://prhlink.com/americanindianhistory>)
- “Between Two Worlds: Indian Imprisonment at Castillo de San Marcos National Monument,” from the National Trust for Historic Preservation (<https://prhlink.com/betweentwoworlds>)
- A Library of Congress guide linking to digital collections, exhibits, and research materials on Indigenous peoples (<https://prhlink.com/indigenouspeoples>)
- *There There*, by Tommy Orange

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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