



## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

# OPENING DOORS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

AS WE WERE WORKING on this issue in late January, acclaimed novelist and poet N. Scott Momaday died at his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the age of 89. Momaday, a member of the Kiowa tribe, was the first Native American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, for his 1968 debut, *House Made of Dawn*. The novel tells, in lushly poetic prose with a roving POV, the story of Abel, a young Native man who grows up with his grandfather on the reservation, serves in World War II, and returns to seek his place among his people and in the larger world.

At the time, relatively few Indigenous writers had been published by mainstream houses (*House* was released by Harper & Row). A *New York Times* reviewer smugly

declared that “American Indians do not write novels and poetry as a rule, or teach English in top-ranking universities”—Momaday taught at UC Santa Barbara—before conceding that the book was “superb in its own right.” The novel certainly impressed the Pulitzer fiction jury, who praised its “eloquence and intensity of feeling, its freshness of vision and subject [and] its immediacy of theme,” heralding the “arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans.”

Momaday opened the door for wider recognition of Indigenous writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, Louise Erdrich, and the novelist who appears on the cover of this issue,

Tommy Orange. (His portrait was illustrated by Dena Cooper.) Orange was just 36 when his first novel, *There There*, took the literary world by storm with its portrait of so-called urban Indians, following a wide range of characters as they prepare for a powwow in Oakland, California, an event that will be marked by a stunning act of violence. *There There* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and a national bestseller.

Now Orange is back with *Wandering Stars* (Knopf, Feb. 27), a sweeping novel that is both prequel and sequel to the earlier work. The book traces the lineage of the Bear Shield and Red Feather clans back to Jude Star, a survivor of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 and the era’s white-run boarding schools, where the mission was to “kill the Indian, save the man.” Readers also learn what happens to Orvil Red Feather and his extended family in the wake of the powwow shooting. In a

starred review, Kirkus calls it a “searing study of the consequences of a genocide.” Read about the genesis of the novel in Orange’s interview with contributor Mark Athitakis on page 10.

Could the gatekeepers of the publishing world again be opening doors to more fiction by Native writers? Recent years have offered some hopeful signs: Morgan Talty’s 2022 story collection, *Night of the Living Rez* (Tin House), won the National Book Critics Circle’s John Leonard Prize, and Amanda Peters’ 2023 novel, *The Berry Pickers* (Catalpult), received the Barnes & Noble Discover Prize and the American Library Association’s Andrew Carnegie Medal. Talty’s first novel, *Fire Exit* (Tin House, June 4), is one of the most highly anticipated books of 2024. Momaday’s legacy lives on.

  
TOM BEER

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