

# Calling for a Blanket Dance

a novel



"Intricate prose and  
unflinching vernacular..."

We crave this kind of  
honest storytelling."

—HONORÉE FANONNE JEFFERS,  
author of *The Love Songs*  
of *W.E.B. Du Bois*

# Oscar Hokeah

# BOOK CLUB KIT

# NAW THEP'THAY'GAW

## *An Essay by Oscar Hokeah*

My father immigrated to Oklahoma from Aldama, Chihuahua, Mexico when he was only 14 years old, following his older cousins to work the peanut and cotton fields on the Southern Plains. My mother is a full blood Native American, half Kiowa and half Cherokee, and she raised me as a single mother between her two tribes. Growing up in this intertribal and multicultural atmosphere, I went from traditional dances with Kiowas and Comanches to traditional dances with Cherokees and Creeks. I have vivid memories of living in old farmhouses with groups of migrant Mexican workers, who spent their days working the red earth of the Southern Plains under the grueling heat of an Oklahoma sun. As I grew into adulthood I came to terms with the various identities informing who I am.

And it wasn't just my cultural identity, but my shifting identity as a man. More importantly, how the Indigenous matriarchs around me informed who I was as a male in my tribal communities. The heart of my novel is about all this: about family, naw thep'thay'gaw, and how families show up for each other, and about masculinity. The title comes from an important ritual in powwow culture. When we call for a blanket dance, we're asking for the community to step up and help out someone in need. The main character, Ever Geimausaddle, has a host of family members willing to do just that, willing to hear the call, step up to the edges of the blanket, and offer a piece of themselves for his greater healing. As this happens, Ever's identity becomes shaped by the family members willing to do the work.

And like Ever, I came to understand the multifarious nature of my own identity through my family. Like Ever, I'm Kiowa, Cherokee, and Mexican. Ever is faced with a host of obstacles and none greater than overcoming the unattainable ideals of toxic masculinity. I knew firsthand the back and forth sway between traditional Indigenous values and an out-of-control patriarchy. I sought to capture the meeting spaces where tribal matriarchy clashed with hyper masculinity—especially in struggling over family and property. In this, Ever became the battleground. I knew as I wrote the novel that Ever would come to a point where the battle cries from his ancestors would break him into a million pieces and he'd have no choice but to build himself back up. The larger question had to do with the possibility of his transformation. As his grandmother, Lena Stopp, asks, "Would my grandson ever be cured?"

In addition to exploring the subtle and obvious ways male-on-male violence creates toxic masculinity, I also wanted to disrupt the homogenous perception of Native Americans. Because I grew up between Kiowa and Cherokee tribes, I lived the beautiful differences of each. Oklahoma is host to 39 different tribes. Each has its own language, practices, customs, and rituals. There are shared practices that bind us together and we also share the scars of a brutal colonial history. This history unites all tribes throughout the Americas. What I felt was missing was acknowledgement of the differences among us. Sometimes this manifests in intertribal conflicts, but more often than not this is the medicine that creates multicultural tribalism, where we exchange and share and gift each other practices and ideologies, such as gourd dance rituals between Kiowa and Comanche and matrilineal customs between Cherokee and Creek. The outcome is a richness in tribal cultures. In juxtaposing Kiowa and Cherokee communities, I wanted to show a dynamic of the Native American world very few consider and also give readers a slice of America very few know about.

Juxtaposing two tribes is easier said than done. Initially, it was easy to distinguish the differences. I knew the difference in languages, rituals, and landscapes. Kiowas were on the Southern Plains. Cherokees were in the Ozark Hills. Kiowas practiced the Gourd Dance, while Cherokees practiced the Stomp Dance. But if that were the extent of it, then this novel would've been completed back in 2008 when I wrote one of its earliest chapters. The element that was most difficult to capture was voice. At an early stage in our development as writers we struggle with voice. It's super elusive. We can name it and see it in our favorite authors. But ask us to develop it and we find ourselves in a depth of mental torment for sometimes years, if not decades. I knew I needed to distinguish the difference between Kiowa community members and Cherokee. How was I going to accomplish this task when I couldn't even hear my own accent?

Attending the BFA Program in Creative Writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, I traveled back and forth between New Mexico and Oklahoma, and I frequently traveled between two different accents. Once I could distinguish the difference between a New Mexican accent and an Oklahoman accent, I then began to hear the difference between Tahlequah and Lawton, and then between Cherokee and Kiowa. I'm not one for talking. I'm more of a listener. I'm good at one-on-one conversations. Because of this trait, I started to pick up on subtle pauses and phrases. After years of listening and contemplating, I finally had a distinctive Kiowa voice and a distinctive Cherokee voice that effectively juxtaposed these two different tribes.

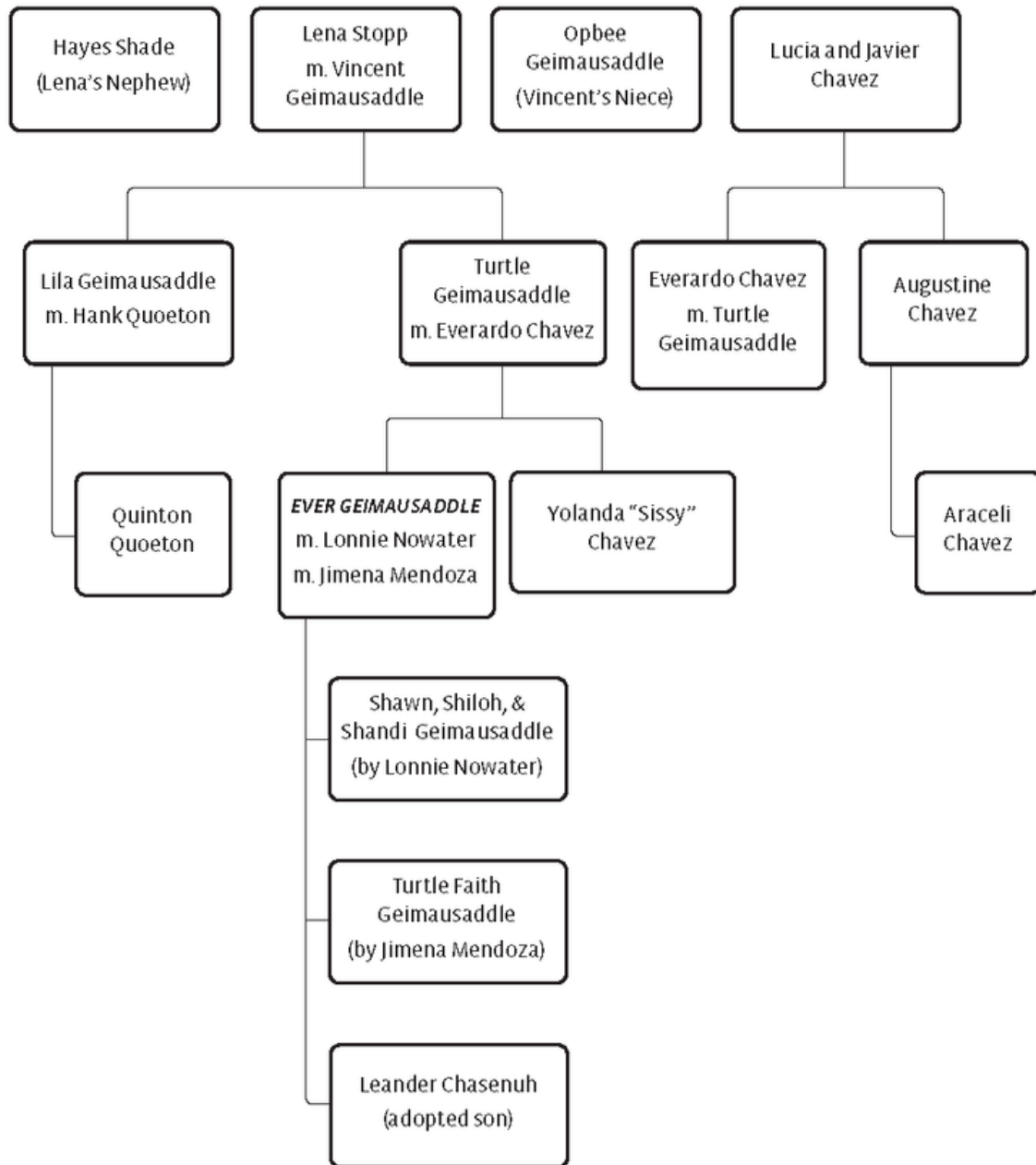
Ever Geimausaddle was born out of a desire to show readers how Native families are tightly knit, and how we solidify bonds through rituals that connect extended family—our cousins are our siblings and our aunts are our mothers—so traditional kinship customs are alive and well in our communities. In a rapidly shrinking world, Natives, like everyone else, are modern constructs of a global community. And so Ever has no boundaries. He is as much Kiowa as he is Cherokee as he is Mexican. He is pulled in numerous directions and pushes back with the ferocity of his ancestors. Ever destroys walls built by metal and emotion. And isn't this the universal human condition? Our desires and identities shaped by those who love us the hardest, who pick up the edges of the blanket in our honor, but ultimately, by our will to make the future our own.

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# Geimausaddle Family



# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Lena's quilt tie into Ever Geimausaddle's identity?
2. What are the similarities between Ever Geimausaddle and his grandfather, Vincent? How do Ever's choices propel his life in a different direction than his grandfather?
3. How does Vincent's last attempt to heal his grandsons relate to living with honor?
4. Why is Ever so aggressive?
5. What are the subtle and obvious ways in which toxic masculinity play out in Ever's life? And what does each narrator do to alter Ever's identity as a man?
6. What do the time jumps in the novel say about memory? What aspects of Ever's life have you as the reader inserted in lieu of the missing time?
7. Why does Sissy tell Lonnie's story?
8. How does Lonnie serve as a foil?
9. What are the similarities between Ever, Sissy, and Turtle in how they engage with Lonnie?
10. Why does Ever become obsessed with finding the person who broke the bench at the powwow?

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

11. How do honor and dishonor play out in Ever's relationship with Lonnie? How does the death of Ever's daughter change the course of his life?
12. Why does Ever rescue Leander?
13. What is the cultural significance of adoption in plains tribe culture?
14. Why are Lena's quilts so important to Opbee?
15. What did Opbee learn from Lena? And what does Opbee want to teach Ever?
16. What has each narrator taught Ever about family and community? At what lengths does Ever go to obtain his home?
17. How do you think each narrator would have acted differently than Ever in the final scene?