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IN REVIEW

WOVEN WAYS OF KNOWING

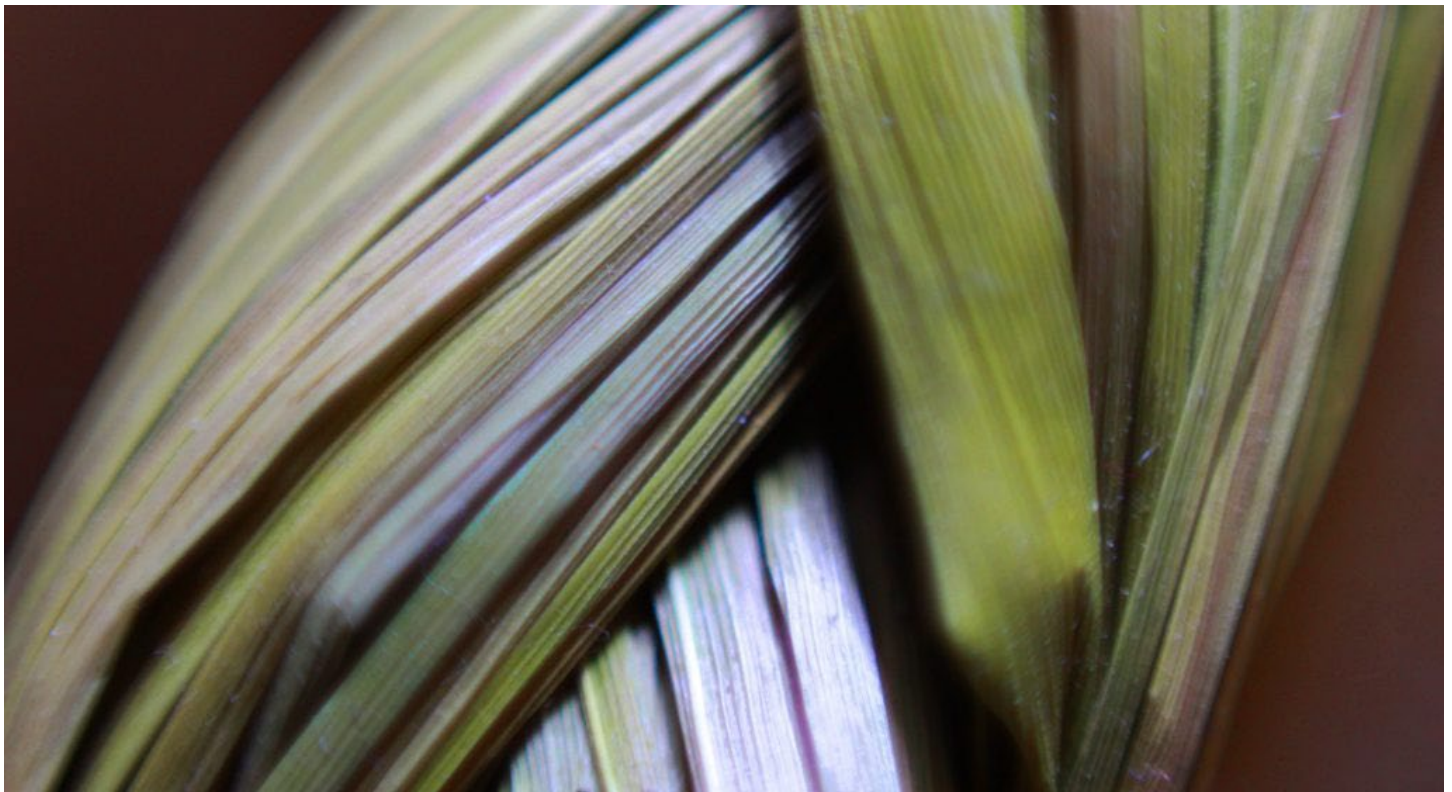
By Mahin Hamilton

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (2013) is a nonfiction compilation of essays written by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a celebrated botanist, poet, and Indigenous member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Each section of the book is broken down according to themes related to a different plant, Native teaching, or personal story. Many times it is a combination of all three.

As with the traditional braiding of sweetgrass, the ultimate purpose of this book is to weave together

three ways of knowing: scientific knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, and the knowledge of the author herself, an Anishinabekwe scientist. Kimmerer combines these elements with a powerfully poetic voice that begs for the return to a restorative and sustainable relationship between people and nature.

She invites us to seek a common language in plants and suggests that there is wisdom and poetry that all plants can teach us. She goes further by explaining that, to her people, respect of earth and plant life is inherent. The earth, sky, water,



Braided sweetgrass, its three strands representing the three interwoven components of the book: scientific knowledge, Indigenous story, and personal narrative.

Image courtesy of Jamieson Lawrence (CC BY-SA 4.0).

A hymn of love to the world.

—ELIZABETH GILBERT

BRAIDING
SWEETGRASS



Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge,
and the Teachings of Plants

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

“Braiding Sweetgrass” (2013) by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Published by Milkweed Editions.

and all living things are viewed as though they are each a nonhuman person—that is, a unique entity that should be cared for and respected, can be communicated with, has a story to tell, and has a lesson to teach. As she weaves together these lessons, she explains how each natural element plays a key role in the historic and modern survival of Indigenous people and their tribal cultures. Each essay weaves in the overarching themes of restoring balance between modern society and nature, and finding harmony between modern science and Indigenous teachings.

Kimmerer speaks continually of the importance of living with a reciprocal mindset between one another as well as between people and the land. It is a way of viewing how we care for and bestow blessings and gifts on one another and the world around us. She argues that this reciprocity creates a universal balance, which is restorative and can lead to a sustainable future for our planet through a return to abundance in the natural world. She writes that we have lost our historic communion with the earth as we have moved away from subsistence living and into lives of abundance. In her essay “Windigo Footprints,” she shares the Native story of Windigo, a mythical monster that is cursed to stalk the land in a never-ending quest for food. Yet its appetite is never satisfied; the more it consumes, the hungrier it becomes. “Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind” (305). This tale was told by her people during the cold winter months, at a time when starvation was a reality. It served as a warning against sociopathology to a communal people that depended on the reciprocity of one another for survival. To compare this folk story in scientific terms, Kimmerer offers Windigo as an Indigenous study on a positive feedback loop or system imbalance. Kimmerer also uses this story as an allegory for the worst of modern society: consumerism, drug addiction, overuse of technology, and the prioritization of wealth and power over global health by large corporations. She reflects that the Windigo of old still roams the earth today.

Kimmerer’s personal and professional life stories are interwoven throughout the book so that it becomes part memoir, part voice for Indigenous peoples, part botanist handbook, and part plea to Western society for a return to ecological balance. She includes stories about her parents participating in rituals that they knew were important though they had not been taught the meaning because so much of her culture was lost when her people suffered the hardships of forced removal, starvation, war, disease, and persecution over the last few hundred years. She writes about clearing a pond as an adult over many summers so that her children could swim there. It became a labor of love for the ecological restoration of the pond as well as for her children, and a way for her to play a small part in correcting the damage done by surrounding farm fields that were overfertilized but completely void of all microorganic life. She writes about slowly, painfully learning her native language, one that has been almost completely lost save for a few committed elders who are passing it on to interested people like her.

In “The Three Sisters,” Kimmerer shares the Indigenous practice of planting corn, beans, and squash together in a mutually symbiotic dance of efficient polycultural elegance. Throughout the story, she repeats the statement that because of these seeds, the people might “never go hungry again” (131). But to Native people, these plants are more than just food. They are also a gift, and they have a lesson to teach about reciprocity. She weaves in the scientific rationale behind the success of this ancient practice as she explains how the three plants grow and benefit one another. Kimmerer shares how the Three Sisters explain the tenets of the Ojibwe people: “Being among the sisters provides a visible manifestation of what a community can become when its members understand and share their gifts. In reciprocity, we fill our spirits as well as our bellies” (134). Because the beans, corn, and squash are fully domesticated, they depend on the people to create the proper conditions for growth. In turn, people need the Three Sisters for sustenance. Ultimately,



*"Three Sisters" garden of corn, beans, and squash.
Image courtesy of Eli Sagor (CC BY-NC 2.0).*

this way of growing together is a representation of a healthy reciprocal relationship, where gifts exchanged create an indefinite growth model of abundance.

The great beauty of this book is found in Kimmerer's voice. She weaves story, science, and personal narrative with a beautifully poetic style that often characterizes Native storytellers. In "The Honorable Harvest" and "Burning Cascade Head," she explains the deep respect that Indigenous people show all living things, how they never take the first thing they see, they never take more than half, and they only take what is

given. This sustainable harvesting practice is incredibly rewarding for the health and success of entire ecosystems, which benefits the people in kind by creating even more food over time. She also explains how gifts are returned to plants and animals for harvesting their very lives so that the people can feed their families. Plants are gently tended to and are given gifts of tobacco. Animals are shown ceremony, prayers are spoken, and celebrations are held in the honor of their sacrifice.

There is a languid and peaceful quality to Kimmerer's prose that reads like a meditation



Kimmerer explains the premise of Indigenous sustainable harvest: never take the first thing you see, never take more than half, and only take what is given. This includes sockeye salmon, shown spawning here at Adams River, Canada.

or dance, inviting the reader into the world she has created of small moments, big ideas, and alternate ways of thinking and knowing that may be strange and beautiful to some of her readers. These readers may be put off by the repeating thematic structure of the book, the storytelling, or even the fluidity of her writing style, and not everyone may agree with her conclusions.

I, however, loved reading this book and savored each essay. Kimmerer asks many questions that deserve pondering. I am the type of reader that will normally devour a good book. With this book, I instead found myself slowing down to process the way she beautifully and simply sets the scene of a story, to capture the essence of a main idea, to find repeating elements, and to contemplate her comparisons and conclusions. Her comparison of the American Pledge of Allegiance to the Onondaga Thanksgiving Address in “Allegiance to Gratitude” is a good example of the way she weaves story with big ideas. This is a heavy, thoughtful analysis of the origin of two cultures that experience identity in very different ways. As such, it should be read with the intention of getting something new out of a familiar concept by looking at the same thing from a different perspective. I experienced reading this book

as one should experience a fine wine: slowly, thoughtfully, and quietly. Kimmerer might say that the book asks to be read in this way. If you enjoyed *Lab Girl* by Hope Jahren (2016), you may also appreciate this book. Both books illustrate the authors’ passion for and devotion to plants. These authors’ relationships with plants transcend the science lab and create a larger narrative than can be found in a scientific journal. In her book, Kimmerer asks the reader to learn a new way of thinking about the connection between Indigenous teachings and science, and between nature and humans. She begs the reader to imagine a world where these elements exist in a harmony that confers agreement, restores a damaged landscape, heals relationships, and ultimately creates a new modern language of sustainability based on modern scientific truths and Indigenous practices. If you are unfamiliar with the beauty of Indigenous storytelling or are looking for a book that can be picked up and skimmed over, you may miss the subtleties of this artfully crafted book. However, if you are looking for a book that invites you to take your time, savor each page, each question, and each big idea, be prepared to come away from it with a different way of seeing and knowing the world.

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