



## **Braiding Sweetgrass: indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer**

### **Book Discussion Guide**

As a botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer has been trained to ask questions of nature with the tools of science. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer brings these two lenses of knowledge together to take us on “a journey that is every bit as mythic as it is scientific, as sacred as it is historical, as clever as it is wise” (Elizabeth Gilbert).

Drawing on her life as an indigenous scientist, and as a woman, Kimmerer shows how other living beings—asters and goldenrod, strawberries and squash, salamanders, algae, and sweetgrass—offer us gifts and lessons, even if we've forgotten how to hear their voices. In reflections that range from the creation of Turtle Island to the forces that threaten its flourishing today, she circles toward a central argument: that the awakening of ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. For only when we can hear the languages of other beings will we be capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and learn to give our own gifts in return. - (*Perseus Publishing*)

## About the Author



Robin Wall Kimmerer is the State University of New York Distinguished Teaching Professor at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. She is founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. She works with tribal nations on environmental problem-solving and sustainability. Part of that work is about recovering lineages of knowledge that were made illegal in the policies of tribal assimilation which did not fully end in the U.S. until the 1970s. Her books include *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* and *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

## Discussion Questions

1. The book lends its title from the sweetgrass that is such a mainstay of indigenous tradition. In what ways does sweetgrass represent the author's beliefs about ecology and the environment?
2. The author, Robin Wall Kimmerer, orients much of the text around her own personal memories, experiences, and research. How did you feel about this?
3. The author's identity as an indigenous woman informs much of the text. In what ways does she explain indigenous culture and tradition to those unfamiliar with such beliefs? Did you come away with a better understanding of indigenous culture and tradition?
4. Kimmerer uses a story about strawberries to introduce the reader to the notion of the "gift economy." What are the pros and cons of the gift economy or in other words, what do you like or not like about this concept? Is Kimmerer's view of the gift economy compatible with your lifestyle?
5. Does the concept of trees having a community relationship, and the scientific explanations of their possible means of communications change how you view your relationship with the forest? If so, how?
6. Do you see the earth as property or as a gift? How does this perspective change the way in which you view the value of what you take from the earth?
7. 'An Offering' (pg. 33-38) provides insight into Kimmerer's understanding of the meaning of ceremony that is "fed from the same bond with the land, founded on respect and gratitude." (pg. 36) How can we express our gratitude and responsibility for the gifts of the land? What can we offer earth in return?
8. What action can you take within your community to bring about positive environmentalism and ecological restoration/preservation?
9. "The Onondaga people still live by the precepts of the Great Law and still believe that, in return for the gifts of Mother Earth, human people have responsibility for caring for the nonhuman people, for stewardship of the land." (pg. 319) What do you believe are the responsibilities of our government and our society in aiding the Onondaga Nation in its efforts to restore Onondaga Lake to a healthy state?
10. Are there practical insights and wisdom you will take from this book and incorporate into your everyday life? Do you already practice some?

[https://longwoodgardens.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/Discussion\\_And\\_Question\\_Guide\\_Braiding\\_Sweetgrass.pdf](https://longwoodgardens.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/Discussion_And_Question_Guide_Braiding_Sweetgrass.pdf)

## Book Reviews

### Choice Reviews

As she did with her John Burroughs Medal-winning *Gathering Moss* (CH, Nov'03, 41-1549), Kimmerer (SUNY-ESF) brings to this volume her expertise as a botanist, insights developed as mother and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and beautiful writing. As the title suggests, she braids together diverse threads of experience and knowledge to create a unified vision of humans interacting with other "people"--animals, insects, plants--in "regenerative reciprocity." Kimmerer's environmentalism is grounded in science, including a graduate study confirming traditional knowledge that carefully harvesting sweet grass for basketmaking helps the plants grow. Most of the book's anecdotes and observations are centered in the countryside near Syracuse where the author lives. She explains eutrophication, through which a pond becomes a marsh becomes a meadow becomes a forest, and her efforts to reverse the process to provide a swimming pond for her daughters. She describes late-night excursions to carry salamanders across a dangerous road, pondering questions about long- and short-term aid. Braiding in stories from the Onandaga people and close studies of human and plant communities, Kimmerer skillfully demonstrates the urgency for and the benefits of ecological restoration. Summing Up: Highly recommended. All readership levels. General Readers; Lower-division Undergraduates; Upper-division Undergraduates; Graduate Students; Researchers/Faculty; Two-year Technical Program Students; Professionals/Practitioners. C. A. Bily Macomb Community College Copyright 2014 American Library Association.

### Library Journal Reviews

Kimmerer (environmental & forest biology, State Univ. of New York Coll. of Environmental Science & Forestry, Syracuse) was awarded the 2005 John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing for her first book, *Gathering Moss*. In these beautifully written essays, she explores the natural world, wedding the scientific method with the traditional knowledge of indigenous people. Kimmerer herself is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Bringing together memoir, history, and science, she examines the botanical world, from pecans to sweetgrass to lichens to the three sisters (corn, beans, and squash), also describing moments of her past, such as boiling down maple sap to make syrup with her children. She shares her efforts to reclaim her culture through studying the language and learning to weave baskets. Intertwined throughout is the history of the injustices perpetrated against indigenous people and the land. Kimmerer writes of investigating the natural world with her students and her efforts to protect and restore plants, animals, and land. A trained scientist who never loses sight of her Native heritage, she speaks of approaching nature with gratitude and giving back in return for what we receive. VERDICT Anyone who enjoys reading about natural history, botany, protecting nature, or Native American culture will love this book.—Sue O'Brien, Downers Grove P.L., IL

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Publishers Weekly Reviews

With deep compassion and graceful prose, botanist and professor of plant ecology Kimmerer (*Gathering Moss*) encourages readers to consider the ways that our lives and language weave through the natural world. A mesmerizing storyteller, she shares legends from her Potawatomi ancestors to illustrate the culture of gratitude in which we all should live. In such a culture, "Everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again... The grass in the ring is trodden down in a path from gratitude to reciprocity. We dance in a circle, not in a line." Kimmerer recalls the ways that pecans became a symbol of abundance for her ancestors: "Feeding guests around the big table recalls the trees' welcome to our ancestors when they were lonesome and tired and so far from home." She reminds readers that "we are showered every day with gifts, but they are not meant for us to keep... Our work and our joy is to pass along the gift and to trust that what we put into the universe will always come back." (Oct.)

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