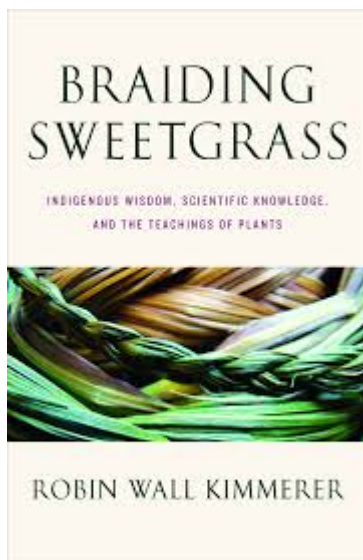


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# Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants – Evergreen Audubon

5-7 minutes

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**Robin Wall Kimmerer is a most unusual author. She is both a scientist and professor of environmental biology and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.**

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she combines both perspectives in her focus on making the earth both welcoming and sustainable. She reminds us of our responsibility to give back to the earth in return for her gifts to us.

Kimmerer begins her story with sweetgrass itself, its fragrance

like honeyed vanilla. Its scientific name is *Hierochloa odorata*, which means fragrant, holy grass. Its name in Potowatomi is *wiingaashk*, which means the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth. It is the center of all the experiences that Kimmerer relates throughout this delightful and troubling story.



The best way to braid sweetgrass, we learn, is to share the activity with someone else. One person holds the ends while the other creates the braid. Then, you shift roles and make another braid. Her book is itself a braid, a woven strand that combines science with the spiritual knowing of the Anishinabekwe people. Her goal is to help us understand and alter our broken relationship with the earth.

*Braiding Sweetgrass* is presented in five sections: planting, tending, picking, braiding, and burning sweetgrass. In each, we learn both of the Native American ways of valuing the natural world and the importance of restoring areas that have been damaged.

In the first section, Planting Sweetgrass, Kimmerer relates the story of Skywoman, from the oral tradition of the Shenandoah natives. Skywoman falls to the earth in this creation story, carrying the seeds of all the grasses, flowers, trees, and

medicines for the new earth. The first plant that grows is sweetgrass. Sweetgrass is a powerful ceremonial plant used as a medicine and to make beautiful baskets. It is the flowing hair of Mother Earth.



Bruce King's portrait of Skywoman

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass* we learn both about the botany of plants valued by the native Americans and the legend and practices that are associated with them. We learn about the pecan trees that they found after being moved from the upper midwest to the Kansas territory and brought with them to Oklahoma Indian territory to replace the hickories, black walnuts, and butternuts of their northern homeland.

In her story of picking wild strawberries, Kimmerer introduces a major concept of the book, that of a gift economy. When she picks strawberries or sweetgrass or anything else that the earth offers, she is careful to thank the earth for its offering and to be certain to take some but not too much. By leaving some, she ensures that more will grow and will be there the next time she comes. In a gift economy, objects remain plentiful because they are treated as gifts. She claims that the modern economy is not based on gifts but on destruction. She urges us not to buy food that has been wrenched from the earth, “depleting the soil and

poisoning our relatives in the name of high yields.”

Kimmerer’s focus on the destruction of the earth is most pronounced in the final section, *Burning Sweetgrass*. Here she describes the Windigo, the legendary monster of the Anishinaabe people, described in stories to scare children into safe behavior. But the new Windigo is not a monster but a human without self-control, one that insatiably devours the earth’s resources, “not for need but for greed.”

Her story centers on the incredible pollution of Onondaga Lake, near Syracuse New York, which was completely destroyed by the production of soda ash, used in various industrial processes. Onondaga Lake was the center of the Iroquois people’s area and, in their stories, the location of the Great Tree of Peace. Today the lake is the location of nine Superfund sites, its water and banks utterly destroyed by those who take from the earth and never worry about what they take. The lake is so polluted that almost nothing lives in it today. It’s famous whitefish are gone, as are the resorts that once lined its banks. Only in the last few years, we learn, are there signs of hope for a slow restoration.

Robin Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a powerful book. It has wonderful stories of beauty and plenty and restoration and disturbing stories of destruction. Reading it is both disturbing and uplifting. In one of the final stories of encouragement and hope, Kimmerer tells us about rescuing salamanders as they try to cross a busy road on their way to their breeding areas in the spring. People come out in the middle of the night to move the slow-moving salamanders from the middle of the road before

they are run over. Her family meets a group of students researching the salamanders to persuade the highway departments to install culverts that will take the amphibians under the road. All these volunteers work to save a beautiful but easily overlooked creature.

I strongly recommend *Braiding Sweetgrass* to you. It is both distressing and inspiring. We are, Kimmerer tells us, the people of the Seventh Fire. We have to choose which path we follow—one where the earth is soft and green or one where it is scorched and black. The choice is a fundamental one facing us today.

*Braiding Sweetgrass* is published by Milkweed Editions, 2013.

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