

# Book Review: *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of the Plants*

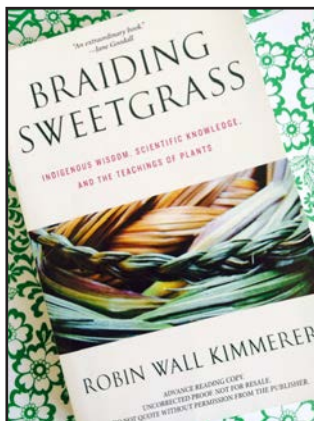
By Robin Wall Kimmerer, Milkweed Editions (2013), 390 pages

Review by Elise Krohn

Once in a great while a book emerges that pushes our knowledge forward and gives us new tools for growth. In a time when humanity is collectively estranged from the land, when we seem to have forgotten the intelligence of the species around us, and when we extract natural resources without thought, Robin Wall Kimmerer awakens us to a rich and meaningful world that is all around us. Each chapter is an adventurous journey into the world of plants with topics ranging from a Potawatomi creation story, to weaving black ash baskets, to igniting student citizenship, to restoring a superfund site.

This is the best book I have read on native science. As an indigenous woman, a scientist, a teacher, and a mother, Kimmerer artfully weaves Western scientific methodologies with native stories, cultural teachings, and the values of reciprocity and stewardship. In the book *sweetgrass* is the centerpiece that grounds a narrative of healing the relationship between humans and the natural world, infusing the book not only with metaphoric meaning, but with the literal knowledge of science. We are reminded that indigenous knowledge with its attention to relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility takes up where hard science leaves off, giving life and conscience to ways of looking at the world that has taken humankind and so many other species down a road of death and destruction.

There is an elegance to indigenous ways



of knowing the world and this elegance shines through in Kimmerer's work. It is a grace that comes not only from a story well told but from the simplicity of the inherent wisdom through which indigenous peoples comprehend their plant relatives. We are humbled when we allow ourselves to be the students of the plant world and acknowledge that they are our elders. And this is the heart of Kimmerer's

project; the reader is drawn into the sheer wonder that arises when we actively do good science and remember that life is so much more than reducible formulae. Kimmerer shows us that science can be a path toward kinship, and when we awaken to the intelligences around us, we become more fulfilled human beings.

At the same time, Kimmerer does not succumb to the temptation to intimidate or overwhelm the reader with esoteric scientific concepts and language, and that is also part of the book's elegance. The door is opened and accessible to a wide audience, not just doctoral students or other academics.

The book wisely explores European colonization and its impacts on people and the land. For example, she addresses the ramifications of a native gift economy being replaced by a market economy. She explains the tradition of the "honorable harvest," which is in stark contrast to the rising tide of resource extraction and disregard for the future health of the land.

Kimmerer is not just a scientist with a solid

base in botany, ethnobotany, and ecology, she is a seasoned award-winning writer of literary biology. Her book *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* was awarded the prestigious John Burroughs Medal for Nature Writing in 2005. *Braiding Sweetgrass* earned the Sigurd Olson Nature Writing Award, and she has served as writer in residence at the Andrews Experimental Forest, Blue Mountain Center, the Sitka Center and the Mesa Refuge.

This book should be a required read for native students—especially those pursuing studies in science and traditional knowledge systems. It is brimming with insights that will fuel the mind and also feed the spirit.

**About the Reviewer**

**Elise Krohn, M.Ed.** is an educator, author, herbalist, and native foods specialist in the Pacific Northwest. She is committed to cultivating healing relationships between people, plants, place and cultural traditions. During

her 15 years of experience teaching in tribal communities, she has worked with elders and cultural specialists to create successful community gardens, food sovereignty resources, a program on healing addiction, and curricula on chronic disease prevention. Through leading ‘train the trainers’ workshops, Elise has multiplied the number of educators who are teaching about native foods and herbal medicines in tribal communities. She also has over 10 years of experience as a clinical herbalist, and has authored two books and numerous articles on this and related topics. Elise is currently a Fellow in Ethnobotany and Ethnonutrition at the Center for World Indigenous Studies.

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