

RECIPROCITY AND GRATITUDE IN *BRAIDING SWEETGRASS*

BOOK REVIEW

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Robin Wall Kimmerer is an enrolled member of the Potawatomi Nation, as well as a devoted mother, botanist, and storyteller. Kimmerer's nonfiction collection of essays, short stories, and Indigenous knowledges, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, praises the teachings of plants, scientific knowledge, and acts of reciprocity with the land. The text intertwines her knowledge of these themes, weaving a narrative that is relatable, informative, and hopeful in its approach on decolonizing earthen relationships and reigniting Indigenous connections that are damaged by settler-colonial structures.

Before all else, *Braiding Sweetgrass* serves as a love letter to the land. Through Kimmerer's late summer 'epiphany in the beans' that tells the necessity of land for food security, or the 'doonk, doonk, doonk'¹ that she hears during the creation of

a traditional black ash basket, readers are awash with respect to the Earth and its inhabitants. This concept of gratitude is shown in 'Learning the Grammar of Animacy,'² where Kimmerer learns Potawatomi.

In Potawatomi, nouns like mountains, rocks, or oceans are named as sentient beings, giving nature an identity that demands respect. This differs from English, which sees nouns as such to be inanimate objects. Kimmerer compares this noun shift as viewing land like a close relative, making one less likely to abuse or exploit it.

Kimmerer is persistent in creating spaces for connection to combat symptoms of consumption and colonization, and she offers acts that are relatable and tangible to readers; this medicine is within reach. She prescribes wading into the muck of an overly eutrophic pond with nothing but 'cotton shorts and a t-shirt'³ on or planting a backyard garden to teach of the surplus of life protruding from land tended with care. Kimmerer suggests for readers to explore nature in messy, intimate ways to experience the unconditional generosity that it offers. By doing so, the settler-colonial lens of land as an exploitable resource dissipates, and an understanding of responsible consumption and reciprocity remains.

Among teachings of land use and love, Kimmerer's writing values kinship and the power of intergenerational learning. Tending to a Three Sister's Garden with her sister becomes more than a traditional form of Indigenous gardening once their children

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweeds Editions, 2013) p. 140.

² Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p.48.

³ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p.86.

recognize the importance of intergenerational knowledges. Later in life, the influence of gardening with their mother inspires Kimmerer's daughters in beginning a garden of their own, seeding the memories to be passed on once again. This emphasis of kinship in reclaiming and sharing traditional methods gives hope to a generation that will value land through the teachings of Indigenous wisdom, rather than the settler-colonial lens.

Towards the end of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the passage 'Defeating Windigo' suggests that people will make the right and just actions to protect the land. In the finale, Kimmerer heals the greedy beast that is likened to colonization and mass consumption with traditional Indigenous plant medicines, ending with an homage to the necessity of storytelling in healing. It is a quick, peaceful act that suggests scientific knowledge, time in nature, and Indigenous wisdoms will result in Indigenous peoples and settlers alike engaging in gratitude with the land.

'Defeating Windigo' focuses on the healing power of reclaimed knowledge and land to heal corrupted minds but leaves out the nuance of land vulnerability and underdeveloped settler-land relationships. The implication that settlers can reconcile their consumption driven 'Windigo thinking' and experience a deeper gratitude of reciprocity after exposure to these knowledges may appear through an idealistic lens. While encouraging harmony, passages as such may disregard the traumatic effects of settler-colonial structures that disadvantage Indigenous lands and peoples.

Braiding Sweetgrass should be read by settlers, Indigenous peoples, scholarly audiences, and children alike. The narrated audiobook version of the text provides an accessible version for young or visually impaired readers. Kimmerer's messages of gratitude and reciprocity are eloquent, yet easily understood, making it a digestible introduction into land vulnerability and settler-colonial impacts.

Previous knowledge of settler colonialism within the North American landscape is required when reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*. For example, 'Burning Cascade Head' — a story of salmon lost to neglected waterways — and 'Putting Down Roots' — which reflects on intergenerational trauma — reference residential schools and colonial policies that resulted in ecological devastation. Neither passage goes into detail on the history of such structures. Therefore, it is important to navigate these texts with an understanding of settler positionality, colonial abuse, and stolen Indigenous lands. With this prior knowledge and Kimmerer's lessons of love for the land and resistance despite tragedy, readers can re-think our morals and practices to centre responsibility, relationships, and reciprocity.