



Community Book Connection Proposal Form

Proposed by: Nina Brown

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Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants

Author: Robin Wall Kimmerer

Year published: 2013

Number of pages: 410

Paperback edition? Yes

Brief Book Jacket Description

Drawing on her life as an indigenous scientist, a mother, and 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 a rich braid of 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 a wider 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.

Blurbs and endorsements

“Robin Wall Kimmerer has written an extraordinary book, showing how the factual, objective approach of science can be enriched by the ancient knowledge of the indigenous people. It is the way she captures beauty that I love the most—the images of giant cedars and wild strawberries, a forest in the rain and a meadow of fragrant sweetgrass will stay with you long after you read the last page.”

—Jane Goodall

“Braiding Sweetgrass is instructive poetry. Robin Wall Kimmerer has put the spiritual relationship that Chief Seattle called the ‘web of life’ into writing. Industrial societies lack the understanding of the interrelationships that bind all living things—this book fills that void. I encourage one and all to read these instructions.”

—Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper, Onondaga Nation and Indigenous Environmental Leader --This text refers to the paperback edition.

How this book serves the mission of the Community Book Connection

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer uses sweetgrass, a plant that once grew abundantly throughout North America, as a metaphor for exploring the consequences and possibilities of the relationships we have with the natural world. Kimmerer is the director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at SUNY and an enrolled citizen of the Potawatomi Nation. Combining indigenous science with perspectives from Western belief systems, the book unfolds as a series of braided stories like the sweetgrass that Kimmerer's family braids for traditional ceremonies, "as if it were our mother's hair, to show our loving care for her" (263).

The book is organized into five sections, each of which is woven from the threads of Kimmerer's personal experiences, her scientific training, and stories from Neshnabé culture. Although the five sections are thematically connected, they can be read separately. There are several chapters that would work well when assigned individually. The first chapter, "Skywoman Falling," introduces the blended spiritual and scientific perspectives that characterizes the book and proposes that rather than seeing ourselves as masters of the world, we should accept that humans are "the younger brothers of creation" who need to look to other species for wisdom. The third chapter, "Gift of Strawberries" uses the bounty of the natural world to explore the implications of the fact that we owe our existence to gifts from the earth. Gift-giving is a major theme of the book and Kimmerer argues that by accepting what the earth has given us we have also entered into a relationship that requires reciprocity in the form of giving as well as receiving. Chapter 6, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," explores indigenous philosophical perspectives that reject the division of the world into categories of "person" or "thing." She encourages us to consider plants, animals, and ecosystems not as inanimate resources to be used, but as lively companions who could be our collaborators in shared strategies for survival.

The existential threat of climate change tends to escape our ability to speak about or conceptualize it productively. Books on this topic often tout the promise of large-scale technological fixes or offer little to turn back despair. *Braiding Sweetgrass* approaches the topic differently by modeling a mindset that upends customary ideas about value, care, and sustainability. The book does not offer a straightforward set of solutions but invites us to think more deeply and creatively about how we could "honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken" (384).

Because of its unique approach, *Braiding Sweetgrass* creates a space for engaging scientific as well as humanistic disciplines for planning events and activities.

- The book extensively explores the concept of value while critiquing the consequences of a consumer-driven economy that relies on non-renewable resources. This content that could be a basis for programs focusing on the economic dimensions of climate change.
- The importance of reciprocal relationships and building communities of care is another important theme in the book. Many grassroots environmental justice organizations in Baltimore exemplify these values and could be partners in programs or service-learning activities.
- Kimmerer observes that "plants teach in a universal language: food" (129). Programs focused on sustainable food and preserving traditional cultural foodways would be a good fit. There are many potential community partners who could share their knowledge with students.
- Language and storytelling feature prominently in the book and this provides a bridge for considering the ways that environmental and cultural destruction have often occurred together. This could be explored through a historical or contemporary lens.