

Book World: 'Braiding Sweetgrass' has gone from surprise hit to juggernaut bestseller.

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GETTYSBURG, Pa. - A dozen years ago, Robin Wall Kimmerer submitted an unsolicited manuscript to Milkweed, a nonprofit independent press in Minneapolis. It was a brick of about 750 pages.

"I sent it out without any confidence that anyone would want to read such a thing," says Kimmerer, 69. "I didn't have an agent. I'm not a professional writer. I'm a botanist. But it was something that I felt I really wanted to say."

The submission was "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants," which asks readers to reconsider how they view and treat the natural world.

Kimmerer's goal was to reach two specific audiences: science colleagues and students. She reached many, many more than that. The book is a word-of-mouth publishing wonder, with more than 1.4 million copies in print and audio, and it's been translated into nearly 20 languages. On Wednesday, Kimmerer was named a MacArthur fellow, a recipient of the "genius grant," which increased this year to \$800,000 paid over five years.

In February 2020, more than six years after initial publication, for which the book had been whittled down to about 400 pages, the paperback edition of "Braiding Sweetgrass" reached the New York Times bestseller list. It's resided there for 129 weeks.

Kimmerer is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. In "Braiding Sweetgrass," she weaves Indigenous wisdom with her scientific training. The book is simultaneously meditative about the abundance of the natural world and bold in its call to action on "climate urgency." Kimmerer asks readers to honor the Earth's glories, restore rather than take, and reject an economy and culture rooted in acquiring more. She invites us to learn from plants and other species, nature's teachers. "If we use a plant respectfully, it will flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away," she writes.

Her work is "an invitation into reciprocity," Kimmerer says. "In return for these spectacular gifts of the Earth, say to yourself: 'What am I going to do about that? What is my accountability in return for everything I've been given?'"

Sales of the book were on the rise when the pandemic began, a moment, Kimmerer says, "of values clarification for us all, of saying what really matters." It was a moment when many people were spending more time contemplating and living in nature, becoming open to the teachings of other cultures, and searching for guidance in the face of pending climate disasters.

"I was sensing, as an environmentalist, this great longing in the public, a longing to belong to a place," Kimmerer says. "I think about how many people have no culture, have no ancestral home. 'I don't belong here' is what I was hearing from people. That sense of not belonging here contributes to the way we treat the land."

The book's success was sudden, but the time it took to arrive was not. As a single mother, Kimmerer's first responsibility was always to her two daughters, now 40 and 35. Her time to write was long confined to the hours after they went to sleep or when she took a sabbatical. (She is a professor at the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, and the founder and director of its Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.) On the book's jacket, she lists "mother" first among her achievements. As an academic, she needed to publish scientific papers and secure tenure, and she was one of the first women on her campus to do so.

"Braiding Sweetgrass" has spurred musical collaborations; inspired visual artists, such as Jenny Holzer; and moved one reader, a textile designer, to create a fabric and skirt, which Kimmerer wore the day I met her, ahead of a reading she was giving that night at Gettysburg College.

She knows how to hold a room. Kimmerer's voice is gentle, seductive and measured. She has the ability to be poetic in describing nature's bounty and searing in her call to protect the Earth and take action. "We've accepted banishment even from ourselves," she writes in "Sweetgrass," "when we spend our beautiful, utterly singular lives on making more money, to buy more things that feed but never satisfy."

Ironically, the book has made Kimmerer a tidy sum, and now there is the hefty MacArthur Fellowship - though, she says, she lives as simply as she did before, "except that it did allow me to convert to green energy at my house. My 200-year-old house is now carbon neutral, thanks to 'Braiding Sweetgrass.'"

Kimmerer tends to speak in prose as transporting as her work, with occasional bursts of exquisite botanist wonkery: "I am, perhaps, well known for my photosynthesis envy." She refers to the book as though it, too, is animate, like one of her beloved plants. She mentions its inherent beauty, on recycled paper, and "how it's made its way internationally to audiences without my having had much to do with it." The book changed her life. She is invited to speak everywhere, including the United Nations, and receives letters and poetry from readers all over the world. Her work, she says, has had "an impact in places that I had never expected."

To her readers, Kimmerer is a plant star; her work, transformative. "I was driving across the country listening to her read the audio book, and I had to pull over several times," says the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Powers. "My eyes were filled with tears, and I couldn't see the road." He became a Kimmerer fan long before she settled onto the bestseller list. As an homage, he named a character after her in his novel "Bewilderment."

Kimmerer is modest in assessing her talent when claiming she is not "a professional writer." She won the esteemed John Burroughs Medal honoring nature writing for "Gathering Moss," a 2003 university press book rooted in academic research that served as inspiration for Elizabeth Gilbert's novel "The Signature of All Things." On the cover of "Braiding Sweetgrass," Gilbert extols the book as "a hymn of love to the world." Had Kimmerer not become a botanist, she says, she would have been a poet.

When her manuscript arrived at Milkweed, editor Patrick Thomas was immediately enchanted. "My guess is that she was born with this voice," he says. Together, he and Kimmerer spent a couple of years paring the book to a manageable length.

Getting published is one thing, being read is another, as many crestfallen authors know. Of the 3.2 million titles that NPD BookScan followed last year, only 2 percent sold more than 5,000 copies, the initial print run of "Braiding Sweetgrass."

There was little marketing push for the book, Kimmerer says. It was barely reviewed. The initial author tour was largely limited to college campuses in Minnesota.

But readers kept buying the book - stacks of it, largely through word of mouth and passionate support from independent bookstores. The reading world broke down into two groups: "Braiding Sweetgrass" fanatics and people who had yet to hear of it. Sales doubled annually; Kimmerer likens it to exponential growth in a forest. Thomas says, "People were hungry for a message like this that was scientific and connected to a tradition they don't understand."

The book changed the fortunes of her publisher. "Braiding Sweetgrass" is the most popular book in Milkweed's 42-year history "by a factor of three," says chief executive and publisher Daniel Slager. Its success is "the craziest thing that has happened here, completely unprecedented in my experience." Since the book's publication, Milkweed's staff has doubled, and so has the number of titles it publishes each year.

In 2016, Kimmerer appeared on Krista Tippett's "On Being" radio program, an episode that was broadcast again this year. "It touched a nerve," Tippett says. "She's naming the limits of science alone that we've come to rely on in the West."

Kimmerer receives 90 or so speaking invitations each month - she accepts about 10 percent of them, many conducted virtually; she's wary of leaving too large a carbon footprint and of becoming depleted. She still teaches. Her beloved garden in Upstate New York is a "weedy mess."

A life of constant public appearances is not one she would have chosen. "I'm a quite private, introverted person. I'm happiest at my desk or in the woods," she says over lunch. "This realm comes at a cost to me. It's not something that I would seek, but it has sought me. It feels important to celebrate this extraordinary moment to the openness of Indigenous knowledge," she says. Last month, the Biden administration named a diplomat for plants and animals.

Kimmerer feels the weight of her family's legacy, the imperative to honor the stories. At age 9, her father's father was sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which Jim Thorpe also attended, less than 30 miles from where she sits. It was one of many schools intended to force the assimilation of its Native students. Kimmerer speaks of her "deep responsibility to our knowledge," Indigenous knowledge, "that they tried to eradicate from our people," she says. "If the world is listening, I have a responsibility to speak."

Kimmerer is working on an illustrated children's book inspired by "Braiding Sweetgrass." (An illustrated young-adult version of the book, adapted by Monique Gray Smith, will be published next month.) She is also writing a third book, which builds on her previous ones. "It's about seeing the natural world as full of persons. It's meant to animate the plant world," she says.

Powers, who appeared at a Harvard symposium with Kimmerer, says that "she looks at things with a long sense of time. I wanted to hear that wisdom, that clear-eyed, levelheaded, intensely knowledgeable voice expound on everything."

Kimmerer loves stories, which she likens to medicine in their power to heal. "Braiding Sweetgrass" swells with them. During her talks, she is inclined to ask questions, inviting readers and audiences to search for answers. "Every one of us every day are showered with gifts from the Earth," she says at Gettysburg College. "We have an economy that is relentlessly asking for more. What we should be asking now is not what we can take, but what can we give?"

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