

**INSIDE THE LIST**

# Timing, Patience and Wisdom Are the Secrets to Robin Wall Kimmerer's Success

By Elisabeth Egan

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**PASS IT ON** People in the publishing world love to speculate about what will “move the needle” on book sales. Enormous marketing and publicity budgets help. So does an author interview with a major media outlet or the benediction of an influential club. It helps if the author has a track record as a best seller or is a household name or has an interesting story to tell about another person who is a household name.

But the most elusive needle-mover — the Holy Grail in an industry that put the Holy Grail on the best-seller list (hi, Dan Brown) — is “word of mouth” book sales. This is the phenomenon whereby one reader recommends a book to another reader who recommends it to her mother who lends a copy to her co-worker who buys the book for his neighbor ... and so forth, until the title becomes eligible for inclusion in this column.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's essay collection, “Braiding Sweetgrass,” is a perfect example of crowd-inspired traction. The book was published in 2013 by Milkweed Editions. It did not have a large-scale marketing campaign, according to Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, who describes the book as “an invitation to celebrate the gifts of the earth.” On Feb. 9, 2020, it first appeared at No. 14 on the paperback nonfiction list; it is now in its 30th week, at No. 9.

Kimmerer has a hunch about why her message is resonating right now: “When we're looking at things we cherish falling apart, when inequities and injustices are so apparent, people are looking for another way that we can be living. We need

interdependence rather than independence, and Indigenous knowledge has a message of valuing connection, especially to the humble.”

This self-proclaimed “not very good digital citizen” wrote a first draft of “Braiding Sweetgrass” in purple pen on long yellow legal pads. She prefers working outside, where she “moves between what I think of as the microscope and the telescope,” observing small things in the natural world that serve as microcosms for big ideas. For instance, Kimmerer explains, “The other day I was raking leaves in my garden to make compost and it made me think, This is our work as humans in this time: to build good soil in our gardens, to build good soil culturally and socially, and to create potential for the future. What will endure through almost any kind of change? The regenerative capacity of the earth. We can help create conditions for renewal.”

Elisabeth Egan is an editor at the Book Review and the author of “A Window Opens.”

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