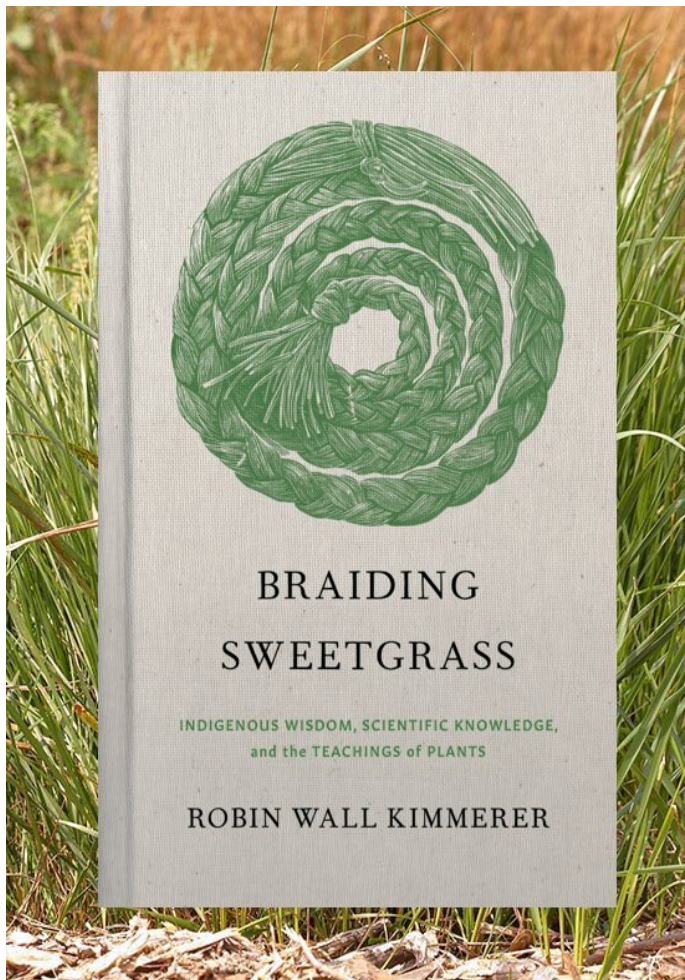


ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

# BRAIDING SWEETGRASS

Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants



## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This summer, we will all read a selection of shared essays from *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Beyond this common set of excerpts, you will choose one of three strands for further reading within the book: field, woods, or water. Each set of essays corresponds to a natural space on our campus. Our all-school read activities will be organized in part around your chosen reading track. We hope that by following one strand of the braid of essays in this book, you will find a way to relate Kimmerer's words to your own sense of place and purpose at Hotchkiss.

### NOTA BENE:

*Kimmerer weaves together three major approaches to nature writing in this text:*



### INDIGENOUS WISDOM

The heritage of Native understandings of the earth, its organisms, and its resources



### SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The study of botany and the scientific method of observation



### THE TEACHINGS OF PLANTS

The value of plants as teachers who offer their gifts and their wisdom to humans



## FIELD

Essays about fields, meadows, and farmlands

FAIRFIELD FARM



## WOODS

Essays about trees, groves, and forests

BEE SLICK WOODS



## WATER

Essays about wetlands, ponds, and rivers

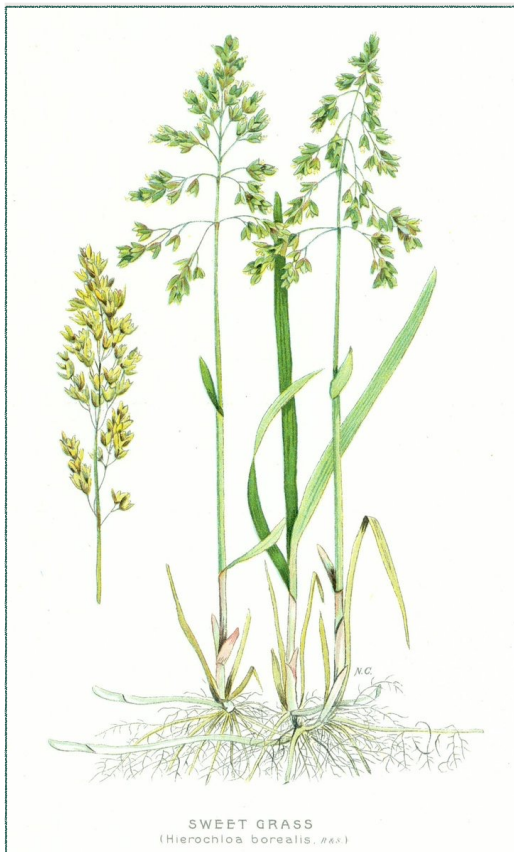
LAKE WONONSCOPOMUC

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer is a plant ecologist, writer, mother, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She holds a Ph.D. in Botany from the University of Wisconsin, and she is currently a Distinguished Teaching Professor at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, New York.

In her role as the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, Kimmerer works to bring indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge together in order to restore ecological systems and reach goals of sustainability in local communities. This concept of reciprocity between humans, plants, animals, land, fellow humans, and other ways of knowing forms the basis of Kimmerer's approach to the natural world.

In addition to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer is also the author of *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, as well as dozens of scientific and literary articles ranging in topic from vegetation patterns and indigenous land management to the human capacity for attention and the rights of the land. By this phrase, Kimmerer intends “not only rights *to* the land but also rights *of* the land, the right to be whole and healthy” (322).



*“That notion that we’re entitled to the wealth of the world and to comfort and to convenience is pretty new for humans. And those comforts and conveniences themselves can be barriers to intimacy and connection... they make us think it’s all about us and our needs, which are not independent of the needs and desires of the millions of other species on the planet.”*

— Interview in *The Believer* (November 2020)

### DID YOU KNOW?

*Braiding Sweetgrass* was published in 2013, slowly rising to popularity by word-of-mouth and finally reaching the *New York Times* bestseller list a full seven years after its initial publication. It has now been translated into at least 10 languages and has sold several hundred thousand copies.

# READING STRANDS:

Read ALL of the selections marked as **Shared** (the blank section, “The Sacred and the Superfund,” is optional). Choose ONE of the further reading strands and read ALL SIX of the essays in that color: **Field**, **Woods**, or **Water**.

New to Hotchkiss? Choose a place on campus that intrigues you, even if you’ve never been there before.

Find yourself drawn into Kimmerer’s writing? Go ahead and read the whole book!

## LEADERS IN OUR LOCAL ECOSYSTEM



### FIELD

“In Potawatomi, the strawberry is *ode min*, the heart berry. We recognize them as the *leaders* of the berries, the first to bear fruit” (23).



### WOODS

“My Onondaga Nation neighbors call the maple the *leader* of the trees.... They do their share for us. The question is: How well do we do by them?” (170)



### WATER

“The eagle was chosen to be their *leader* and to watch over the world” (111).  
 “Restoring relationship means that when the eagles return, it will be safe for them to eat the fish” (338).

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# FIELD

- The Gift of Strawberries
- Asters and Goldenrod
- Witch Hazel
- Epiphany in the Beans
- *Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*
- Putting Down Roots



Members of FFEAT harvest kohlrabi at the Farm

“Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate” (25). **How might you reciprocate the gifts of the land and the people here at Hotchkiss?**

“When I stare too long at the world with science eyes, I see an afterimage of traditional knowledge. Might science and traditional knowledge be purple and yellow to one another; might they be goldenrod and asters?” (46) **What are some assumptions you make based on familiar forms of knowledge, and how might you widen your worldview?**

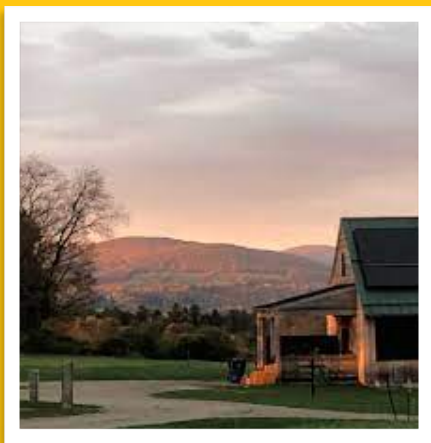
“How do we show respect? Sweetgrass told us the answer as we experimented: sustainable harvesting can be the way we treat a plant with respect, by respectfully receiving its gift” (165). **Rather than seeing the influence of humans as purely negative, Kimmerer focuses on our potential for reciprocity and sustainable action. How can you envision these practices at work in the Hotchkiss community?**

### THREE TO SEE:

1. The Sioux Chef, run by Sean Sherman and dedicated to revitalizing Native cuisines of North America
2. Christina Gish Hill: “Regrowing Indigenous Agriculture Could Nourish People, Cultures, and the Land”
3. This map of bioregions cited by Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (168), as well as the website and book for RAFT (Renewing America’s Food Traditions).

## HERE AT HOTCHKISS: FAIRFIELD FARM

Fairfield Farm occupies 287 acres of land one mile south of main campus. Once known as Tory Hill Farm, the land was owned by the parents of founder Maria Bissell Hotchkiss and sold to the family of John ’47 and Jeanne Blum in the 1970s, who subsequently deeded it to the School in two parcels in 2004 and 2010.



The Grange at Fairfield Farm

The FFEAT program (Fairfield Farm Ecology & Adventure Team) offers students the opportunity to gain hands-on farming experience in the form of a co-curricular, with activities ranging from planting and harvesting to property maintenance and care of the Farm’s pigs and chickens.

Today, Fairfield Farm is the site of numerous community events and supplies 35,000 pounds of produce annually to the Hotchkiss Dining Hall, as well as a portion of the pork and eggs we eat. Cows from nearby Whippoowill Farm also graze on Hotchkiss pastureland, giving our Dining Services access to local, grass-fed beef and lowering the School’s overall carbon footprint.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The word *campus* comes from the Latin for “field.” In English, the sense of “the grounds of a school or institution” dates to the eighteenth century, in reference to Princeton University.



# WOODS

- The Council of Pecans
- Maple Sugar Moon
- *Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket*
- Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide
- The Sound of Silverbells
- Old-Growth Children



*Photograph by Thomas Blagden, Jr. '69*

“The trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective... what we see is the power of unity. What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together. All flourishing is mutual” (15). **How might we imagine such collectivity on the global scale? What about the smaller scale of sustainability efforts at Hotchkiss?**

“Traditional harvesters recognize the individuality of each tree as a person, a nonhuman forest person. Trees are not taken, but requested. Respectfully, the cutter explains his purpose and the tree is asked permission for harvest. Sometimes the answer is no” (144). **How would it change our relationship with trees and other natural beings to view them as capable of dissent? Would it make us less likely to use “a sheet of paper... as if it were nothing” (148)?**

Kimmerer quotes Franz Dolp, who writes of his efforts to restore an old-growth cedar forest: “To love a place is not enough. We must find ways to heal it” (286). **What are some ways we might heal the land at Hotchkiss, including Beeslick Woods? How might this heal our relationship to that land as well?**

### THREE TO SEE:

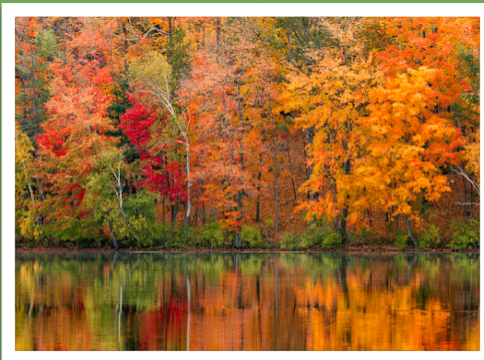
1. Susie Cagle for *The Guardian*: [“Fire is Medicine”: The Tribes Burning California Forests to Save Them](#)”
2. The Forest History Society: [“American Prehistory: 8,000 Years of Forest Management”](#)
3. Sarah Laskow for *Atlas Obscura*: [“Did Native Americans Bend These Trees to Mark Trails?”](#)

## HERE AT HOTCHKISS: BEESLICK WOODS

Also called Beeslick Brook Woods or Hotchkiss Woods, most of the trees in our 200-acre forest are only about eighty years old. Crumbling stone walls, rows of cedar with metal fence brackets, and other telltale signs indicate that Beeslick was logged and used as pastureland through the nineteenth century.

In 1940, Hotchkiss students in the Woods Committee (later the Woods Squad) planted 1,000 white pine seedlings as part of a state initiative to re-forest Connecticut. The density of pine and hemlock in Beeslick attests to this history. Other mixed hardwoods present in our forest include hickory, paper birch, ash, and oak.

Today, Beeslick contains several cabins and a network of trails mostly maintained by Hotchkiss students. The Woods Squad will be revived this winter as a co-curricular within the Outdoor Program and will continue to provide stewardship of the forest through trail maintenance and the removal of fallen trees and invasive species.



*Foliage on Lake Wononpakook (Long Pond)*

### DID YOU KNOW?

For 65 years, Hotchkiss English teachers have tapped our maples for sugaring. Since 1991, Chris Burchfield has led his students in hanging roughly 50 buckets from 40 maple trees and processing the sap into 10 gallons of syrup in our own Sugar Shack.



# WATER

- An Offering
- A Mother’s Work
- The Consolation of Water Lilies
- Sitting in a Circle
- Burning Cascade Head
- Witness to the Rain



*View of Lake Wononscopomuc*

Kimmerer remembers her father pouring out coffee as a form of thanks to the land and water during childhood camping trips in the Adirondacks: “The stream runs down over smooth granite to merge with the lake water, as clear and brown as the coffee. So begins each morning in the north woods: the words that come before all else” (34). **What words and acts of thanksgiving might you offer to the land and water on our campus?**

Of the long process of clearing algae from her pond, Kimmerer writes, “It is my grandchildren who will swim in this pond.... What I do here matters. Everyone lives downstream” (97). **How are the creeks, lakes, and wetlands of our own campus connected to the world around us? What might it look like for us to restore and care for them?**

“The First Salmon Ceremonies were not conducted for the people. They were for the Salmon themselves, and for all the glittering realms of Creation, for the renewal of the world. People understood that when lives are given on their behalf they have received something precious. Ceremonies are a way to give something precious in return” (252-3). **What kinds of ceremony might we create at Hotchkiss to honor the lakes and their living creatures?**

### THREE TO SEE:

1. Kelsey Leonard’s TED talk, [“Why Lakes and Rivers Should Have the Same Rights as Humans”](#)
2. Ariel Zambelich for NPR: [“In Their Own Words: The ‘Water Protectors’ of Standing Rock”](#)
3. The Audobon Society on bald eagle habitats: [“The Importance of Onondaga Lake as an IBA”](#)

## HERE AT HOTCHKISS: LAKE WONONSCOPOMUC

From its vantage on the hill, Hotchkiss enjoys a sweeping view of Lake Wononscopomuc (Lakeville Lake), which is fed by Sucker Brook as it wends its way down the northeastern corner of our campus. Lake Wononscopomuc, the deepest natural lake in the state, was the site of indigenous habitation by 1400 C.E.



*Bonfire on Lake Wononscopomuc*

The lake is stocked annually with fish and is home to trout, bass, pickerel, perch, and sunfish, as well as a variety of birds, including loons, geese, ducks, herons, osprey, and bald eagles. Hotchkiss students not only enjoy recreational swimming in the lake, but can also participate in co-curriculars, such as Sailing and Rowing, which take place on the water.

A twin lake, Lake Wononpakook (Long Pond), sits across Interlaken Road, tucked away in Beeslick Brook Woods. Our watershed also contains wetland acreage, several small ponds, and Beeslick Brook, with its series of waterfalls feeding into Lake Wononpakook.

### DID YOU KNOW?

*Wononscopomuc* means “rocks at the bend in the lake” in the indigenous Algonquian language of Mahican. *Wononpakook* means “land at the bend in the pond.”



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Kimmerer writes, “I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledges” (139). What are some unfamiliar subjects or new ways of knowing that you would like to explore?
- Kimmerer is concerned by “A square mile of industrial soybeans. A diamond mine in Rwanda. A closet stuffed with clothes. Windigo footprints all, they are the tracks of insatiable consumption” (307). Can you think of ways to reduce your own patterns of consumption or the larger culture of consumption within the Hotchkiss community?
- Recently, hundreds of unmarked graves were discovered at boarding schools for indigenous children in Canada, not unlike the Carlisle, PA boarding school where Kimmerer’s grandfather was sent by force. How might the very idea of boarding school resonate differently for various groups within our community?

## MORE TO EXPLORE:

- Learn more about the Akwasne Freedom School and the Thanksgiving Address of the Mohawk people that Kimmerer describes in “An Allegiance to Gratitude.”
- Search this interactive map of Native lands, languages, and treaties before and after European colonization from Native Land Digital.
- Read this piece by Nicola Jones for Yale’s *Environment 360*: “How Native Tribes Are Taking the Lead on Planning for Climate Change.”

## HERE AT HOTCHKISS:

- Look forward to Sweetgrass Sundays: 3 Sunday afternoon workshops throughout the year linked to *Braiding Sweetgrass* and open to students, faculty, staff, and families.
- Sign up for FFEAT, Sailing, Rowing, or an Outdoor Program team as your co-curricular (including Mountain Biking, Expeditionary Leadership, Woods Squad, and more).
- Join SEA (Student Environmental Action), a student advocacy group that addresses everything from energy consumption to food waste and fast fashion on campus.
- Peruse the online exhibit *Forest, Field, and Water: The Hotchkiss Landscape Through Time*, which was displayed in Tremaine Gallery in the fall of 2018.
- Look ahead to a new exhibit in the Rotunda this fall, *What the Trees Try to Tell Us We Are*. Combining paintings, prints and drawings from local and regional artists with poems and quotations about trees, this exhibit will ask us to consider trees through an artist's lens, as independent and complicated living beings.
- Enroll in an Environmental Science class at Hotchkiss. Course offerings include Forest Ecology, Limnology, Conservation Biology, and more.
- Take a Senior English elective on Nature or Native American Literature.
- Participate in our annual Earth Day celebrations on campus.
- Learn more about the School’s Environmental Initiatives, from the biomass facility to Fairfield Farm and our stewardship of land and water resources.