

Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses (2003: Oregon State University Press), Robin Wall Kimmerer

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I love books that make me look at some aspect of the world—large or small—with totally new eyes.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a professor of environmental and forest biology at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF), has dedicated many decades of her life to the study of plant ecology and bryology (the scientific study of mosses). She is also an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and her writing moves fluidly between scientific observation and traditional indigenous knowledge—also based on centuries of observation and experience, but incorporating cultural and spiritual considerations and wisdom.

I've been wanting to read *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* (2003) since I read Kimmerer's more recent and better-known book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013), a book that still keeps popping up in conversation, year after year, with all kinds of unrelated people in my life.

Gathering Moss is a series of interrelated essays that weave together Kimmerer's scientific expertise and hard-won field research—wading for hours through deep waters, climbing arduous cliffs, fighting off swarms of biting insects—and her stories and reflections on home, family, culture, and ecology.

I learned so much that astonished me about mosses from this book: their incredible diversity and adaptability, their complex and varied reproduction strategies, their ability to lie dormant or dried out for decades but fully revive with a few drops of water, their role in the first stages of succession in healing devastated landscapes.

I loved Kimmerer's investigation into indigenous uses for mosses and her wry insights on how little the male-dominated worlds of science and anthropology have traditionally interacted with certain common aspects of human experience. Mosses, she eventually realizes, because of their incredible ability to hold moisture, were in constant use for diapering and for menstrual hygiene. These subjects were taboo, or at least embarrassing, to predominately male researchers, and thus barely mentioned in anthropological writing.

I was also fascinated by Kimmerer's chapter on mosses in cities, which talks about cities mimicking cliff habitats that humans and other resilient and stress-tolerant creatures have lived in for millennia.

Mosses and lichens are particularly sensitive to air pollution, Kimmerer writes, and so the presence or absence of mosses on city trees and in parks is an important indicator of ecosystem health.

She suggests keeping an eye on the trees and sidewalks around you for mosses and lichens and finding reassurance in their presence. I am happy to take her advice.