Braiding Sweetgrass—Chapter Summaries

Part 1: "Meeting Sweetgrass"

"An Invitation to Remember"

Kimmerer opens the book by situating it within Anishinaabe belief: the people understand themselves to be living in the time of the Seventh Fire, a prophesied era of both darkness and possibility. Rather than beginning with a scientific argument or a personal story, she starts with an invitation—asking readers to remember a way of being in the world that modern Western culture has largely forgotten, one in which humans are understood to be in kinship with all living beings, not just other people. Plants, animals, rivers, and stones are not backdrop or resources in this worldview; they are relatives, teachers, healers, and guides.

A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to language. Kimmerer points out that in English, the pronoun "it" is used to refer to most animals, plants, and nonhuman beings, while "he," "she," and "they" are reserved for humans. She argues this isn't a neutral grammatical convention—it encodes a deeply held assumption that humans are separate from and superior to the rest of life on Earth. She contrasts this with Potawatomi and other Indigenous languages, which use what she calls a "grammar of animacy," applying the same pronouns to humans and nonhumans alike, acknowledging shared personhood across species. To bring this into English, Kimmerer proposes a new pronoun: *ki* for a single living being (or a being imbued with sacred spirit, like a ceremonial drum or medicine bundle) and *kin* as the plural. She frames this not as a radical innovation but as a recovery of something that was always true.

She also addresses capitalization. In English, people's names are capitalized as a mark of respect and recognition of their personhood, while plant and animal names are not—unless they contain a human name (as in "Steller's Jay" or "Douglas Fir"). Kimmerer reads this as another subtle, systemic expression of human exceptionalism, the quiet assumption embedded in everyday language that humans occupy a different and higher category of existence.

The chapter closes with acknowledgments: Kimmerer thanks the Indigenous language experts and storytellers who guided her, and she notes that many of the stories in the book come from oral traditions and therefore belong not to any single teller but to a community of storytellers across generations.

"Skywoman Falling"

This chapter is presented as an illustrated "shared telling"—a retelling of a traditional Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe origin story, offered with the awareness that Kimmerer is only one of many messengers for a story that belongs to many people. The chapter opens with a traditional invocation that honors all those who told the story before.

The story begins in Skyworld, a place above the world we know. A woman—Skywoman—falls through a hole in Skyworld created when a great tree was uprooted. As she falls, light from Skyworld streams through the opening above her. Below, there is only darkness and the vast water. But in that darkness, many eyes are watching.

A flock of geese sees her falling and flies up to meet her, breaking her fall by catching her on their wings. They hold her gently, but they know they cannot support her for long. They call a council—otters, beavers, swans, fish, and other water creatures gather to deliberate. A great turtle volunteers his back as a resting place for Skywoman.

The animals understand that Skywoman needs land to live on. They know there is mud deep at the bottom of the water, and one by one the strongest swimmers dive down to retrieve it. All fail. Finally, the weakest swimmer—Muskrat—volunteers. He disappears beneath the surface for a long time. When he reappears, he is nearly dead, but in his paw is a small handful of mud. Turtle tells Skywoman to spread this mud on his shell. As she sings and dances in gratitude, the mud begins to grow and grow until it becomes the whole of the Earth. Skywoman plants seeds she had carried from the Tree of Life as she fell, and plants spring up everywhere. Together, Skywoman, the animals, and the plants create Turtle Island—the Indigenous name for North America, and for the Earth as home.

The chapter is notable for its structural contrast with the Biblical creation story, which figures largely in Western culture. In the Genesis account, a singular god creates the world from nothing and grants humans dominion over it. In the Skywoman story, creation is collaborative—it arises from the generosity and sacrifice of many beings working together, and the human arrives not as sovereign but as a grateful guest. The weakest creature, Muskrat, is the one whose offering makes everything possible, which Kimmerer underscores as a lesson about the importance of every being regardless of size or strength.

"Wiingaashk"

The title of this chapter is the Potawatomi word for sweetgrass, which translates as "the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth." Kimmerer opens with an imagined scene: she meets the reader and places a bundle of freshly picked sweetgrass in their hands. She describes the scent as intensely personal—for her it brings up memories of honey, vanilla, rivers, and rich earth—and invites the reader to notice what it brings up for them. The scientific name of the plant, *Hierochloe odorata*, means "fragrant holy grass," a name that bridges botanical and sacred registers.

Sweetgrass, Kimmerer explains, is one of the four sacred plants of the Potawatomi and many other Indigenous nations, alongside tobacco, cedar, and sage. It is used in ceremonies, as a medicine, and to make baskets. She describes sweetgrass not as a resource or an object of study but as "both medicine and relative"—and notably, she uses the pronoun "she" throughout the chapter, enacting the grammar of animacy she introduced in Chapter 1.

Botanically, sweetgrass reproduces primarily through underground stems called rhizomes, which can stretch several feet from the parent plant, sending up new shoots along their length. Seeds are rarely viable. Because of this, sweetgrass cannot cross human-made barriers like roads and parking lots, making habitat fragmentation a serious threat to the plant's survival.

The chapter closes with a meditation on braiding. To braid sweetgrass properly, tension is needed—and while it is technically possible to braid alone, the best method is with a partner holding the end and providing resistance. A braid of sweetgrass is a traditional Potawatomi gift, offered as an expression of kindness and gratitude. Kimmerer offers her book as another kind of braid: three strands—plant knowledge, Indigenous ways of knowing, and scientific understanding—woven together as a healing gift to readers.

Part 2: "Planting Sweetgrass"

"The Council of Pecans"

Kimmerer begins with history: in 1838, the US military forcibly removed the Potawatomi people from their ancestral lands in Illinois and marched them to a reservation in eastern Kansas. Her own great-grandmother was among those displaced on what became known as the Trail of Death. In Kansas, the Potawatomi encountered a tree unknown to them, a rich nut-bearing tree they called *pigan*, meaning "nut." As the federal government pressured Indigenous people to abandon their languages and assimilate into English-speaking American culture, the word transformed into "pecan."

Kimmerer uses the pecan tree as her first major scientific and philosophical case study. She notes that pecan trees across a wide region fruit simultaneously—a phenomenon not explained by individual tree conditions. Potawatomi elders had long taught that trees speak to each other, and modern science confirms this: trees communicate during crises like insect infestations through pheromones carried on the wind, and they share carbohydrates and other resources through underground fungal networks. The result is that a whole grove can fruit at the same time, producing a collective abundance that ensures some nuts are always left to germinate and grow into future trees.

Kimmerer uses this as a model for human communities, encouraging readers to consider what a society based on mutual flourishing—where the success of one supports the success of all—might look like. She also introduces the principle of the Honorable Harvest here: when collecting ripe pecans, one takes only what is given and leaves enough for others, expressing gratitude for the gift rather than treating it as a commodity.

"The Gift of Strawberries"

The Potawatomi word for strawberry is *ode min*, or "heart berry." The name comes from the belief that the first strawberry grew from the heart of Skywoman's daughter. Kimmerer recalls picking wild strawberries as a child and thinking of them as a pure gift—something the earth simply offered, requiring no purchase, no exchange.

The chapter develops an extended contrast between a gift economy and a market economy. In a gift economy, natural resources are received with gratitude as offerings from the earth; in a market economy, they are commodities assigned a price and traded competitively. Kimmerer argues that framing nature's abundance as gifts creates a sense of reciprocity and gratitude that sustains life and community, while framing it as a commodity creates scarcity, competition, and disconnection.

She makes a pointed argument about sweetgrass in particular: for the plant to be used in sacred ceremonies, it must be picked properly and given as a gift. If sweetgrass is purchased rather than gathered and given with intention, it loses its sacred character. The act of gift-giving is not incidental to the meaning—it is the meaning. She extends this logic to modern meat production, arguing that industrial farming does not treat animal life as a gift but as a resource extracted without acknowledgment, and she encourages readers to reconsider the food they eat in terms of what lives were given and whether gratitude was offered in return.

"An Offering"

This chapter begins with a vivid family memory. Every morning of the annual canoe camping trips Kimmerer took with her family to the Adirondacks, her father would wake early, pour the first cup of coffee onto the ground, lift his face to the morning sun, and offer words of thanks to what he called "the gods of Tahawus." Tahawus is the Algonquin name for Mount Marcy, the highest peak in the Adirondacks—though Kimmerer notes pointedly that on most maps the mountain is named after a governor who never set foot there. Her father repeated this ceremony everywhere they traveled, always offering the first of something as a sign of gratitude and respect for the landscape.

Even as a child, Kimmerer knew these words were sacred, though she didn't fully understand their origin. She later discovers that formal Indigenous ceremonies—the ones involving sacred languages and traditional protocols—had been severed from her family when her grandfather was taken from his home and sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Her father's morning ritual was a kind of memory, a fragment of ceremony preserved in family habit even after its formal context had been stripped away. When Kimmerer, as an adult, participates in full traditional ceremonies and hears the words spoken in the original language, she says she hears them in her father's voice. The language had changed, but the intention—the heart of gratitude—was the same.

The chapter argues that ceremony, whether formal or informal, has the power to anchor people in awareness and gratitude for the gifts of the Earth. Kimmerer invites readers to find their own ways of cultivating such practices.

"Asters and Goldenrod"

Kimmerer traces the origins of her scientific career. As a college freshman, she told her academic advisor that she wanted to study botany because she wanted to understand why asters and goldenrods grew together so beautifully. The advisor dismissed her, telling her that science was not about beauty and that if she wanted to study beauty she should go to art school. Kimmerer draws a deliberate parallel between this experience and her grandfather's arrival at the Carlisle school: in both cases, an Indigenous person was told their way of seeing the world was wrong and must be replaced with the dominant culture's framework.

She went on to pursue botany anyway, and she learned the scientific answer to her question: asters and goldenrods grow together because their complementary colors—purple and gold—attract more pollinators together than either would attract alone. It is a beautiful answer, and a scientific one. But the process of becoming a scientist gradually shifted her relationship to plants from an Indigenous worldview—in which plants are teachers and companions—to a scientific one in which plants are objects of study, puzzles to be solved. She began asking "what is it?" instead of "who are you?"

The chapter turns when Kimmerer encounters a Navajo woman with deep, intimate knowledge of local plants acquired entirely outside of formal botanical training. The woman's knowledge is vast, specific, and relational—she knows the plants the way you know family members. This encounter reawakens something in Kimmerer, and she begins the long process of bringing her Indigenous way of knowing back into harmony with her scientific practice.

Part 3: "Tending Sweetgrass"

"Maple Sugar Moon"

The chapter opens with an Anishinaabe legend about maple sap. Long ago, according to the story, maple sap ran thick and sweet—so sweet that people could simply lie beneath the trees with their mouths open and be fed. When the Original Man, Nanabozho, came upon a village where the people had grown lazy and were living this way, he was displeased. To restore the necessary balance between gift and gratitude, he poured river water into the trees, thinning the sap. Today, 40 gallons of sap must be collected and boiled down to make a single gallon of maple syrup. The story frames this labor not as punishment but as a reminder of human responsibility: the abundance of the earth requires human engagement, care, and gratitude to be fully realized.

Kimmerer then describes the actual process of maple sap production. Maples begin to run in late winter, when light sensors in the tree's budding tips register the first thaw and trigger sap flow through the xylem. In traditional Indigenous practice, sap was collected into long troughs carved from tree trunks, left to freeze overnight, and then the ice—which is mostly water—was removed, concentrating the sugar solution. This process was repeated until only syrup remained. Tradition holds that this technique was learned from squirrels, who chew bark to release sap and then eat the sweet crystallized crust that forms when the sap ices over.

Kimmerer describes her own attempts to make maple syrup from trees on her property and frames the labor as a collaboration: the tree gives the sap, and the human does the work of transformation. Both contributions are necessary, and gratitude throughout the process is not incidental but constitutive—it is part of what makes syrup, syrup.

"Witch Hazel"

This chapter is narrated by Kimmerer's daughter Larkin, making it one of the book's most distinctive sections. Larkin recalls meeting their elderly neighbor, Hazel Barnett, when she was five years old. Larkin had never met anyone named Hazel before and had only known the word from the plant witch hazel; she wondered privately if this Hazel was the witch for whom the plant had been named.

Hazel had come to live with her disabled son Sam after he suffered a heart attack on Christmas Eve. She had never been able to return to her own home, because Sam needed constant care and she could not drive. Her love for her lost home was visible: whenever she spoke of it, she got a faraway look in her eyes.

Kimmerer and Larkin made a point of driving Hazel back to her house when they could. The first time they entered, it was exactly as Hazel had left it on that Christmas Eve—dinner still on the table, everything frozen in place from the moment she'd gotten the call. In the backyard was a wild witch hazel bush from which Hazel had made medicine for all her neighbors for years. She told Larkin: "the woods have medicine for every kind of hurt."

As a Christmas surprise, Larkin and Kimmerer eventually cleaned and decorated Hazel's home and organized a party there for her family and friends. When Hazel walked in, her face lit up completely. When Kimmerer's family eventually moved away from Kentucky, Hazel gave them antique ornaments from her own Christmas tree. Larkin describes her mother's friendship with Hazel as medicine—as healing for the spirit in the same way the plants in Hazel's garden were healing for the body. The chapter is a quiet, personal illustration of the kind of mutual care and reciprocity that Kimmerer argues for throughout the book.

"Allegiance to Gratitude"

Kimmerer opens by describing a practice at the Onondaga Nation School, near her home in Syracuse, New York. While students in schools across the country begin their day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, students at the Onondaga Nation School recite the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, also called the Words That Come Before All Else. Because the school sits on sovereign Onondaga territory and therefore outside US jurisdiction, it is free to make this choice—and Kimmerer reads that freedom as a significant act of political and cultural sovereignty.

She describes the Thanksgiving Address in detail. It is a lengthy, flowing oratory that moves through the entire living community of the Earth, naming and offering thanks to each in turn: the people gathered, the Earth, the waters, the fish, the plants, the food plants, the medicine herbs, the animals, the trees, the birds, the four winds, the Thunderers, the sun, the moon, the stars, the Enlightened Teachers, and the Creator. Many versions include a call-and-response in which listeners affirm their collective gratitude after each section.

Kimmerer contrasts this with the Pledge of Allegiance, which asks for loyalty to a political nation. The Thanksgiving Address asks for nothing—it only offers thanks and calls the community to awareness. She argues that it functions simultaneously as a spiritual practice, an ecological lesson (it names and attends to all the species and systems of an ecosystem), and a political act (it pledges not to a nation-state but to the living world). She challenges readers to bring this orientation toward gratitude into their own communities, not necessarily through the Thanksgiving Address specifically, but through whatever practices help them remember the gifts of the Earth.

Part 4: "Picking Sweetgrass"

"Epiphany in the Beans"

This is a short, lyrical chapter in which Kimmerer is picking pole beans in her garden when she is struck by an overwhelming feeling: the beans taste the way they do because the earth loves humans. This is not presented as sentiment but as something she genuinely believes. The variety and deliciousness of the food the earth produces—the fact that it could be bland and nutritionally adequate but instead bursts with flavor and color—is, for Kimmerer, evidence of a loving relationship between the land and the people who live on it.

If the earth expresses love through food, she argues, then humans have a responsibility to return that love through care for the land. She encourages readers to plant gardens—not primarily for economic efficiency but as a way of entering into a loving, reciprocal relationship with the land, one that requires attention, labor, and gratitude.

"The Three Sisters"

This chapter examines the traditional Indigenous practice of planting corn, beans, and squash together—a trio known as the Three Sisters. Kimmerer explains how the system works ecologically: corn sprouts first and grows tall, providing a natural trellis. Beans then grow up the corn stalks, fixing nitrogen in the soil. Squash emerges last, spreading broad leaves along the ground that shade out weeds and retain moisture. The three plants together are significantly more productive than any of them alone.

She pairs this with an Indigenous legend about the Three Sisters. In a time of hunger, three beings appeared and were generously fed by the people. In gratitude, they revealed themselves to be corn, beans, and squash, and they have nourished people ever since. When European colonists first saw Indigenous gardens planted in this way, they interpreted the apparently chaotic three-dimensional sprawl of vegetation as evidence that Indigenous people didn't know how to farm properly. And yet, Kimmerer notes, they ate their fill and kept coming back. The story and the science together demonstrate that Indigenous ecological knowledge—encoded in stories long before Western science articulated the mechanisms—was sophisticated, effective, and deeply relational.

"Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket"

Kimmerer takes a traditional basket-weaving class with Potawatomi artisan John Pigeon, whose family's baskets are held in collections at the Smithsonian and museums around the world. The chapter begins not with a neat pile of weaving materials, as most craft classes would, but with a living tree in the forest. Pigeon explains his task to the tree, asks its consent to be harvested, and waits for a response—watching for signs of willingness or resistance in the tree's surroundings and the quality of the bark. If consent is sensed, a prayer is offered and tobacco is given as a reciprocating gift before the tree is felled.

The process of transforming a black ash trunk into thin, flexible strips for weaving is laborious and time-consuming. Pigeon describes the work as a useful metaphor for the balance required of human beings: it demands patience, skill, and sustained attention. After the strips are prepared, Pigeon stops the students before they can start weaving and scolds them gently for leaving wood shavings and scraps on the ground. The tree, he reminds them, honored them with its life. They owe it complete respect—every scrap must be collected and honored, nothing wasted.

Kimmerer reflects on this as she begins to weave. She notes that three rows of weaving are required before the basket becomes stable—which she takes as a metaphor for the three foundations of a stable society: ecological well-being, material welfare, and human spirit. The chapter is a sustained meditation on what it means to treat a living being as a gift rather than a resource.

"Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass"

Formatted as a scientific report—with introduction, literature review, hypothesis, methods, results, discussion, and conclusions—this chapter describes a research project designed to investigate why sweetgrass populations in many areas are declining. Sweetgrass basket weavers had long believed that reckless, careless harvesting was causing the decline. But the received wisdom in mainstream ecology was that human harvesting always diminishes plant populations and that the best thing humans can do for plants is leave them alone.

Against the skepticism of senior academics in her department, Kimmerer supported her graduate student Laurie in designing a study to test the traditional Indigenous claim. Laurie set up experimental plots and compared three conditions: traditional harvesting (pinching off stems and taking about half the plant), reckless harvesting (pulling plants up by the root), and no harvesting at all. The results were striking. Sweetgrass harvested traditionally showed a greater increase in growth than plants left untouched. Plants pulled by the root, predictably, declined. The traditional Indigenous method didn't just avoid harm—it actively stimulated the plant's growth.

Kimmerer interprets this as scientific confirmation of an Indigenous understanding: sweetgrass and humans exist in a reciprocal relationship. The plant gives its gifts to people, and people, by harvesting respectfully, create the conditions for the plant to flourish. Western science had assumed no such relationship was possible—Laurie's data showed otherwise. The chapter frames the scientific method not as superior to Indigenous knowledge but as one possible way of verifying what Indigenous people already knew.

"Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide"

Kimmerer describes a map of the United States in which political state boundaries have been replaced by bioregions named for their most iconic species. The northeastern region where she lives becomes "Maple Nation." The Onondaga people consider the maple the leader of the trees—a recognition of its ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance. Maples purify air and water, producing essential ecosystem services. Kimmerer asks what reciprocal gestures humans make in return.

She visits a sugarhouse during syrup season and observes how traditional maple production, when practiced carefully, can be largely carbon neutral: the fire that boils the sap is fueled by trees thinned sustainably from the maple forest, and the smoke produced is offset by the carbon the living trees continue to absorb. She then turns to climate change, which poses an existential threat to maple trees in the northeastern United States—rising temperatures are pushing the range of viable maple habitat northward. She argues that environmental advocacy and political action on behalf of maple trees—and trees in general—is a form of reciprocity, a way of returning some of what the trees have given.

"The Honorable Harvest"

This chapter offers the most systematic articulation in the book of the Indigenous principles Kimmerer has been weaving throughout. The Honorable Harvest is the informal name for a set of guidelines governing human interaction with the earth and other beings. Kimmerer presents these as a series of interrelated principles rather than rigid rules.

Among them: take only what you need; take only what is freely given; never take more than half; use everything you take; give thanks for what is given; share; give back in reciprocity; sustain the ability of the land to give in the future. She illustrates some of these with specific examples—a fur trapper who leaves nutrient-rich food for pregnant martens to ensure the health of future generations, an experience of harvesting a plant and sensing, in some direct and embodied way, that it did not want to be taken. She closes by challenging readers to choose at least one of these principles and practice it in their daily lives, no matter how small the beginning.

Part 5: "Braiding Sweetgrass"

"In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place"

This chapter centers on the Anishinaabe figure of Nanabozho, the Original Man, who Kimmerer describes as the culture hero and great teacher of how to be human. According to the creation story, Nanabozho was the last of all beings to be created. He found himself set down into a fully populated world of plants, animals, winds, and water, and he understood instinctively that he was a newcomer—that his role was not to control or master this world but to learn from it. His Creator instructed him to walk through the world so that each step was a greeting to the Earth. As he traveled in each of the four directions, he learned from the sacred plants he encountered: Tobacco in the East taught him that the Earth would be his greatest teacher; Cedar in the South taught him responsibility to protect life; Sweetgrass in the North taught him compassion; and Sage in the West taught him the balance of creation and destruction.

Kimmerer offers Nanabozho as a model for non-Indigenous readers—not because they can become Indigenous, she is clear about that, but because the qualities Nanabozho models (humility, curiosity, gratitude, attention) are qualities available to anyone. She uses the plant known as White Man's Footstep—a plantain species brought to North America by European settlers that has since naturalized and become part of the ecosystem—as an imperfect but instructive metaphor for how settlers might eventually become indigenous to a place, if they learn to give back more than they take.

"Sitting in a Circle"

Kimmerer takes her botany students on a five-week research trip to Cranberry Lake Biological Station in the Adirondacks. One of their first tasks is building a traditional wigwam together, a process that requires collaboration, the use of individual strengths, and sustained collective effort. They gather materials from the surrounding wetlands—the swampy lake they affectionately call "Walmarsh"—and learn from the landscape itself.

Kimmerer teaches the students about cattails, which they harvest from the water. The underground rhizomes can be roasted like potatoes or ground into flour; the leaves can be woven into twine and thread; the clear gel inside the stems has cooling and antimicrobial properties, soothing the cuts and insect bites the students accumulate. After each harvest, the students discuss what they owe the marsh in return for what it has given them. The trip is structured as an experiment in living reciprocally with the land using traditional methods. On the final night, the group sleeps together in the wigwam they built. The next morning, one student joins Kimmerer for her morning ritual of greeting the sun—a small, spontaneous enactment of exactly the kind of ceremony she advocates.

"Burning Cascade Head"

Kimmerer describes the traditional practices of Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest surrounding the annual return of salmon from the ocean to freshwater rivers. The chapter opens with the image of the grassy meadows above the coast being set ablaze as a beacon to guide the salmon home—a welcome fire visible from the sea. When the first salmon arrived at the estuary, the community would allow them to pass safely and thank them for leading the way. Four days later, the First Salmon would be ceremonially taken, shared, and eaten, and its bones would be returned to the river, adding nutrients to the water and honoring the salmon's sacrifice.

These ceremonies, Kimmerer explains, were not only spiritually significant but ecologically effective. The burned meadows burst into bloom in spring, fertilized by ash and warmed by the opened soil. The rivers benefited from the nutrients in the returned bones. The whole system—people, salmon, meadows, estuaries—existed in a relationship of reciprocal care.

When colonists brought disease to the Pacific Northwest, the ceremonies died with the communities that held them. Colonist farming practices dramatically altered the estuaries, disrupting salmon migration patterns and causing population declines from which the salmon have not recovered. Kimmerer suggests that the monitoring of salmon populations by modern biologists—carefully counting fish in restored estuary channels—is a kind of new welcome ceremony, a tiny beacon calling the salmon home. She presents this as an example of braiding Indigenous knowledge with modern science.

"Putting Down Roots"

Kimmerer tells the history of the Mohawk people, who for centuries inhabited the fertile Mohawk River valley in what is now New York State. In the 1700s, colonization and the violence that accompanied it forced the Mohawks off their ancestral lands. Later, the federal government took Mohawk children—including, Kimmerer notes again, her own grandfather and his brother—to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, whose stated mission was "Kill the Indian to Save the Man." Braids were cut off. Native languages were forbidden. Traditional practices and ceremonies were punished. Hundreds of families were severed from their cultures, their languages, and their land.

The chapter then turns to Tom Porter, also known as Sakokwenionkwas, a Mohawk elder and storyteller who is working to reverse this damage. Porter has established Kanatsiohareke, a 400-acre retreat near Fonda, New York, dedicated to teaching Indigenous languages, foodways, histories, and traditions. Kimmerer describes it as "Carlisle in reverse"—a place that returns to people what was taken from them. She visits Kanatsiohareke to plant sweetgrass as part of the work of ecological and cultural restoration. While planting, she discovers a beautiful crystal in the soil, which she interprets as a gift from the Earth—a sign of welcome.

"Old-Growth Children"

Kimmerer describes the old-growth cedar forests of the Pacific Northwest as one of the most spectacular examples of ecological abundance she knows. These forests, home to trees hundreds and sometimes thousands of years old, created layered, complex ecosystems supporting enormous biodiversity. For the Indigenous people who lived there, cedar was foundational to material and spiritual life: its rot-resistant wood was used to build longhouses and ocean-going canoes; its roots provided fibers for weaving; its inner bark was used for clothing and baskets; its boughs were used in ceremonies. Kimmerer presents these forests as a model of what ecological harmony—long uninterrupted relationships between beings—can produce.

When European settlers arrived in the West, large-scale logging began destroying these forests. Entire hillsides were cleared. After clearing, "pioneer species"—fast-growing, resource-hungry plants—moved in, competed aggressively for light and nutrients, and then departed once they had taken what they needed, leaving degraded soil behind. Kimmerer explicitly compares this pattern to the behavior of settler colonists: arrive, extract, deplete, move on.

She closes by honoring the work of Franz Dolp, an ecologist who spent years working to restore old-growth forest conditions on a logged hillside—replanting, nurturing, waiting for the slow processes of old-growth succession to begin again. Dolp died in a collision with a logging truck. Kimmerer presents his quiet, persistent, multigenerational work as a model of commitment to the earth.

Part 6: "Burning Sweetgrass"

"Windigo Footprints"

Kimmerer is out snowshoeing alone when a heavy storm forces her to turn back. As she retraces her steps, she notices a second set of prints inside her own tracks. She looks nervously around for the Windigo—a figure from Anishinaabe legend, a human being who committed cannibalism and was thereby transformed into a monster with a heart of ice, a body that towers like a tree, and feet as large as snowshoes. The Windigo wanders the landscape in winter, driven by an insatiable hunger, crying out with its craving, unable to be satisfied no matter how much it consumes.

Kimmerer explains that in the context of Anishinaabe society—which prized cooperation, mutual care, and the suppression of individual greed for the good of the community—the Windigo served as a cautionary symbol. In the desperate winters when food was scarce, the story reminded people of the taboo against cannibalism and the consequences of choosing one's own survival at the expense of another's. Greed, even in extremity, was a path to monstrousness.

She then draws the myth into the present. Contemporary Indigenous thinkers and scholars have identified Windigo thinking in modern capitalist culture: the insatiable consumption of resources, the addiction to material goods, the corporate extraction of the earth's wealth without regard for future generations. American culture, she argues, not only tolerates Windigo thinking—it celebrates it, calling it ambition, success, and growth. She challenges readers to recognize Windigo thinking in their own lives and communities and to resist it.

"People of Corn, People of Light"

Kimmerer retells the Mayan creation story as a meditation on the qualities that make humans capable of living sustainably with the Earth. According to the story, the divine creators fashioned the world and then wanted a being capable of praising and appreciating creation. Their first attempts failed. People made from mud simply dissolved. People made from wood were beautiful but ungrateful—they lived without acknowledging the gifts around them. People made from light were even worse—arrogant and self-absorbed, they believed themselves to be on a level with the gods. Each time, the creators had to start over.

Finally, the creators made people from corn—yellow corn and white corn mixed with water. The people of the corn were grateful. They marveled at the world. They treated the other beings of creation with respect and love, and in return, the earth sustained them abundantly.

Kimmerer then describes corn itself as a model of symbiosis: it requires earth, water, sunlight, and air to grow; it takes in carbon dioxide (which is harmful to animals) and releases oxygen (which is essential to animal life); and, unlike most plants, corn requires human cultivation to reproduce—its seeds are bound so tightly in the husk that without human hands to plant them, the species would not persist. Corn and humans, she suggests, are in a relationship of mutual dependence that mirrors the relationship the people of the corn had with all of creation. She challenges readers to follow their example.

"Shkitagen: the People of the Seventh Fire"

The Potawatomi, whose name means "People of the Fire," regard fire as a sacred gift. Traditionally, small, carefully managed fires were used to shape landscapes—clearing undergrowth to encourage new growth, opening meadows, and maintaining the health of forests. Kimmerer introduces *Shkitagen*, a fungus that grows on certain birch trees and has the remarkable property of sustaining embers indefinitely without going out. The Potawatomi used Shkitagen as a sacred firekeeper, carrying live embers in the fungus when traveling.

The chapter then presents the Anishinaabe Seventh Fire Prophecy, a series of predictions about the journey of the Anishinaabe people through history. The First through Third Fires describe the gradual migration of the people westward toward the Great Lakes. The Fourth Fire brought prophecy of the coming of new people—the European colonists—who might be either brothers or a danger, depending on whether they came with open hands or closed fists. The Fifth Fire was the time of destruction: nations broken, families separated, languages forbidden. The Sixth Fire brought the prophecy of a restoration to come. Now, according to the knowledge keepers who interpret the prophecy, the people are living in the time of the Seventh Fire—a time when leaders must look back to find the fragments of what was lost and carry them forward. If the choice is made wisely, a final Eighth Fire can be lit: a fire of unity that brings all peoples together. Kimmerer presents this prophecy as a framework for understanding the present moment and a call to choose the path of respect and reciprocity over materialism and greed.

"Defeating Windigo"

In the book's final chapter, Kimmerer walks into the woods where she tends sacred medicine plants. She discovers that her neighbor has had loggers remove all the trees from his property, and without their shade, the medicine plants she has carefully tended will burn in the summer sun. She feels the Windigo's touch in this destruction—not a mythical monster but the same logic of extraction and indifference she has been writing against throughout the book.

She recounts how, in Anishinaabe legend, Nanabozho fought the Windigo through the summer—and summer, in the Anishinaabe understanding, is the time of plenty, the season that defeats Windigo. She argues that abundance—not the hoarding of wealth, but the genuine experience of having enough—is the antidote to the Windigo's insatiable hunger. Gratitude, she adds, is the practice that cultivates that sense of abundance: it teaches us to see what we have rather than fixating on what we lack.

The book ends with an act of imagination. Kimmerer pictures herself luring the Windigo to her home, offering it medicine to purge all the greed and hunger and loneliness inside it, then healing it with remedies made from the gifts of the earth. As the human being inside the monster comes back to life, she begins to tell him the story of Skywoman Falling—the same story with which the book began. The loop closes. The braid is complete. The book itself becomes the gift of sweetgrass it was always meant to be: a healing offering, woven from many strands, given in the hope that it will help mend the world's relationship with the earth.