

Check It Out!

LESSONS

from the

LAND

by Lynn Nowak

Port Townsend Public Library director Melody Sky Weaver says the book most recommended to her since her arrival at the library has been *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Now, with this year's Community Read, booklovers of all ages will have the chance to read and appreciate this work in a new and even more understandable way: a young adult adaptation, just released in 2022, of Kimmerer's successful nonfiction book.

Titled *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, this version was meticulously crafted by Monique Gray Smith and beautifully enhanced with illustrations by Nicole Neidhardt. It is the focus of 2023 Community Read activities and events throughout March.

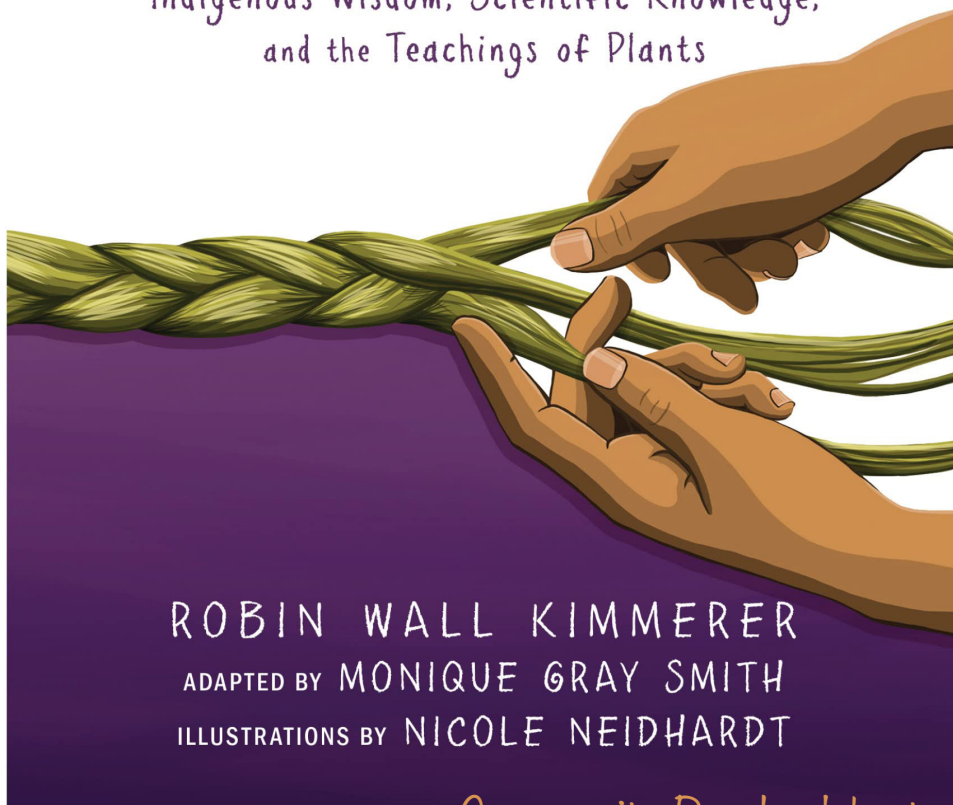
"I read the original in 2020; it's such a healing book," Weaver said. It created a lasting impression on her, and Smith's adaptation has made the lessons from

(continued on next page)

ADAPTED FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

*Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge,
and the Teachings of Plants*



ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

ADAPTED BY MONIQUE GRAY SMITH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICOLE NEIDHARDT

Community Read celebrates
Indigenous wisdom, science, and
what plants teach

the original still more accessible to all readers, Weaver said. Smith's own website describes it this way: "This new edition reinforces how wider ecological understanding stems from listening to the earth's oldest teachers: the plants around us."

Author Kimmerer's love of and connection to plants was not always appreciated in academia, but she found a way to combine her Indigenous upbringing with scientific knowledge. She explains in her book that her Indigenous worldview taught her to look for relationships and to understand the threads connecting all things—"to join instead of divide." But, as she further explains in the book, once she gained a university education, including three degrees, and became a professor, science taught her to break things down and to focus on evidence and logic.

"This is the intersection we need to look at—the Indigenous wisdom and the science. . . . It's so powerful to bring those worlds together," Weaver said. The bonus for Kimmerer was that in doing so, she was able to find her authentic self, Weaver added. "The book gives us hope about the teachings of plants, while also honoring Indigenous wisdom without cultural appropriation."

Kimmerer, the original author; Smith, the adapter; and illustrator Neidhardt are all Indigenous women explaining their cultures using their own means of storytelling. Readers will enjoy stories about sweetgrass, of course, but also about harvesting sap for maple syrup and about witch hazel, wild strawberries, cattails, and cedar. And while the book is a celebration of Mother Earth, the book also recognizes motherhood in general—and pays it deep respect.

Weaver has long wanted to bring *Braiding Sweetgrass* to the community. "When we're choosing a Community Read, the book has to be really good—well written and compelling. First and foremost, whether it's fiction or nonfiction, it has to be a good story," she said. "I want people to love what they're reading. I have this intuition about whether a book will resonate with the community. I didn't want to pick anything else for the Community Read,

A braid of
sweetgrass is
often given
as a sign of
kindness,
compassion,
and gratitude.



Imagine being
raised in a
culture in which
gratitude is the
first priority.

and the YA version was just coming out," Weaver explained. Plans started falling into place.

For the last couple of Community Reads, Zoom opened up new presentation possibilities. This year's celebration will host the first in-person author talk since the start of the pandemic. "Hopefully, it will be the best of both worlds this year," Weaver said. And although it wasn't possible to bring Kimmerer to Port Townsend in person, Smith is scheduled to appear on March 28 at the Northwest Maritime Center. Other in-person and online programs are planned throughout the month (*see sidebar, page 3*).

Nearly 900 "read and release" copies of the book—the most ever for the Port Townsend Public Library—were available by early February; the book can also be found at Imprint Bookstore in downtown Port Townsend.

Smith, a Canadian author of books for young people, said in an online book talk that she considered it a privilege to adapt *Braiding Sweetgrass*. "Young people have the potential to change our world," She said the decisions they make will be different, as is their understanding of the gifts given by the planet and how to use them for good. Smith explained that for her, it felt disrespectful to use the word *cut* when adapting the original, which she calls a "sacred text." But, while remaining true to the three main themes—Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants—she did pare down the book considerably. "It feels to me like you're polishing and sculpting the gift, not cutting," was Kimmerer's admiring comment.

Young adult adaptations of nonfiction books are an increasing trend, Weaver explained, citing YA versions of *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Boys in the Boat*, and *I Am Malala*. As a result, all of these titles are therefore more accessible to all ages. Weaver said that although this edition is intended for young adults and available to all adults, elementary-age children will also like the book. It's designed for teachers in the classroom, too, incorporating user-friendly graphics, handy scientific definitions, and many discussion prompts. "It just ticks all the boxes," Weaver said enthusiastically.

Her aim with this Community Read is to also celebrate regional agricultural and artistic communities, as well as to honor Indigenous wisdom and knowledge by involving representatives of the Jamestown S'Klallam tribe. Among the programs offered during the month, for example, is a tour of the Chetzemoka (Čičməhán) Trail. Other partners include the Port Townsend Film Festival, which plans to show family-friendly shorts by Indigenous filmmakers, and Northwind Art, which is involved in a gratitude seed project. And relating to seeds, plans are in the works for launching a seed library in association with the Master Gardeners. "The deep collaboration we have here I've never had in any other community," Weaver said.

She feels strongly that it's important to introduce the community to different genres of books. A fantasy theme was last year's focus. And this year? "Reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* comes at the perfect time for us, she noted. Using this book as inspiration, "Let's unlearn hurrying and keep the silver linings we've gleaned from the pandemic."

When something
is understood
as a gift
instead of a
commodity,
a door opens.



What would it be like
to consider
the tree
in the Kleenex,
the algae
in the toothpaste,
the oaks
in the floor?

The library's goal for 2023, Weaver explained, is to "slow down," and "savor what you're reading. Be more intentional. Take time to appreciate. How many people have read a book by an Indigenous author? That's the beauty of great art. It helps you see the world in a different way." 

What will you do this Community Read?

The 2023 Community Read is back in person and online. Check the library's website for specific links to online programs at ptpubliclibrary.org, under "Programs," "Community Read." All events are free.

Northwind Art

Seeds Are Postcards from the Land: A Community Art Project **March 1–31, Port Townsend Public Library**

Write gratitude postcards to the land, which will be on display at the library and will then be planted to grow flowers. Details online and at the library.

Jefferson County Historical Society

Native Peoples of the Olympic Peninsula Education Trunk **March 1–31, Port Townsend Public Library**

On loan from JCHS and developed in consultation with the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, this trunk contains a variety of commissioned objects, books, games, and digital materials.

StoryWalk

"When We Are Kind"

March 1–31, Kah Tai Lagoon

A fun outdoor adventure for kids and their families. Walk and read Monique Gray Smith's book. Explore anytime during daylight.

Book Lovers' Café

March 6 (Monday), online via Zoom, 2 PM

Join the library's book club for a group discussion with library director Melody Sky Weaver.

Artist Talk: Nicole Neidhardt

March 9 (Thursday), online via Zoom, 6:30 PM

Join Navajo (Diné) artist Neidhardt as she discusses her process and shares her beautiful illustrations from *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults*.

Community Book Discussion at the Castle

March 16 (Thursday), Manresa Castle Hotel, 8 PM

Enjoy themed drinks and discuss the book with library director Melody Sky Weaver.

Čičiməhán Trail Walk

March 18 (Saturday), Chetzemoka Park, 1 PM

Enjoy a guided three-mile loop walking trail, starting at the Chetzemoka Park trail sign.

Port Townsend Film Festival

Indigenous animation screening

March 25 (Saturday), Rose Theatre, 11 AM

In collaboration with PTFF, enjoy short animation in many styles by Indigenous artists. Go to ptfilmfest.com or the library for free tickets.

Meet the Author: Monique Gray Smith

March 28 (Tuesday), Northwest Maritime Center, 6:30 PM

Join Monique Gray Smith for a presentation and reading. Books may be purchased at Imprint Bookstore for signing afterward.

Reading about Lands . . .

◆ *Our Common Ground*

John D. Leshy (2022)

On January 2, 2016, armed militants occupied the visitors center (then closed for the holiday weekend) of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon. Led by Ammon Bundy, son of Cliven (who staged a hostile standoff with federal land managers in Nevada in 2014), the militants demanded that the federal government “relinquish” the wildlife refuge and nearby Malheur National Forest to the state. One month later, the occupation ended without the federal government’s having surrendered an acre.

The militants’ legal theory was that the Constitution prohibits the federal government from retaining land in federal ownership. In *Our Common Ground*, John Leshy—a former top lawyer at the U.S. Interior Department—demolishes this theory, arguing not only that the Constitution authorizes the federal government to retain its public land base, but that these lands have enjoyed substantial bipartisan support throughout the nation’s history.

The book traces the interlocking histories of national forests, national parks, wildlife refuges, and the federal agencies managing them, as federal land policy evolved from privatization (e.g., for homesteading) to retention for resource development and conservation, with a gradually increasing emphasis on the latter. Along the way, Leshy catalogs the

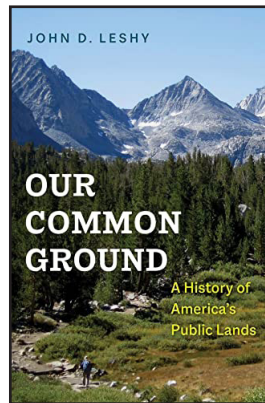
numerous failed attempts by traditional western economic interests (mostly the grazing industry) and small government ideologues to transfer federal lands to states or private parties. Leshy uses these serial failures to argue that the idea of federal lands is widely popular, and that the opponents are cranks or greedy opportunists, or both.

Charles Wilkinson, a noted western land law historian, and others have made similar arguments. Leshy, however, focuses specifically on Congress’s role in rejecting federal land divestiture and in repeatedly affirming the importance of federal lands to the American public.

Although this admirable history of America’s public lands succeeds in most respects, Leshy’s core assertion—that widespread support for federal lands has helped unify a fractious public (making these lands the “common ground” of the title)—seems a bit too sunny.

In October 2022, a county sheriff in Grant County, Oregon (just north of Harney), arrested a Forest Service employee carrying out a prescribed burn on Forest Service land because the fire had burned eighteen acres of an adjoining ranch. The ranchers, long-standing opponents of federal land ownership, appear to have urged the arrest. In some places, at least, common ground is long way off.

—Rich Johnson



◆ *Fastest Things on Wings*

Terry Masear (2015)

In this charming memoir of rescuing hummingbirds in Hollywood, we learn just how committed Terry Masear is to her cause. In two years, she went from discovering a baby hummingbird washed from its nest during a rainstorm to rehabbing hundreds of these little beings. Fielding thousands of emergency calls every year, she spends hours on the phone, counseling people who believe a nest has been abandoned (usually it hasn’t), advising folks how to rid a nest of mites, or telling them in no uncertain terms not to feed ants to a hungry hummer.

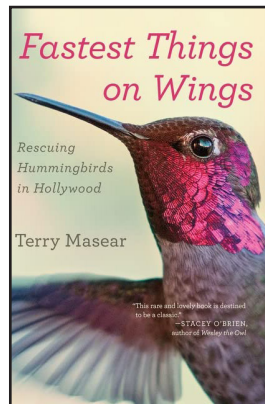
In a narrative as fast-paced as the birds themselves, we learn about hummingbird physiology and—do not roll your eyes—psychology. Masear writes, “This is the story of Gabriel,” a male Anna’s hummingbird named for his rescuer, who found the bird after it had collided with a

limousine during a violent Beverly Hills windstorm. It is also the story of Pepper, who arrived with a broken wing a month later, and her special bond with Gabriel.

Over years of close involvement with her charges, the author has felt her own full spectrum of emotions—from anguish when one of them dies to tears of joy at each successful release. We learn each bird’s arrival story—“from chicks in nests cut by tree trimmers to fledglings retrieved by cats and dogs”—plus some of the science behind hummingbirds’ awe-inspiring way of life.

The book kept my interest throughout, not just because I learned so much about these tiny birds but because I was fascinated by the dedication of the folks involved with rescuing them in an urban environment. Masear is not only a skilled writer but someone who wowed me with her devotion.

—Fran Post



◆ *Out of the Dust*

Karen Hesse (1997)

For a raw and, yes, gritty account of life during the American Dust Bowl, readers need look no further than a middle-grades novel written more than twenty-five years ago. *Out of the Dust*, winner of the 1998 Newbery Medal, is also among the very best stories for any age of courage, resilience, and love. Written in first-person free verse about challenges not unlike those handed us by the pandemic, Hesse's book holds up today because of its quiet, yet definitive message asserting, "We can get through this."

Against the bleak and often miserable backdrop of the relentless 1930s dust storms in Oklahoma, protagonist Billie Jo goes to school, dutifully handles chores on her family's farm, and even finds time to enjoy playing piano. But then a terrible accident changes her family, her home, and her vision of the future.

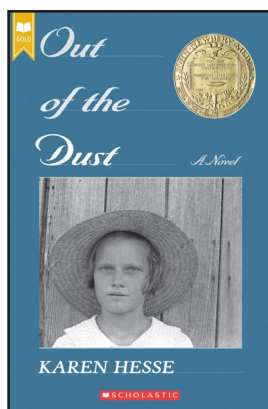
When I read Billie Jo's tale more than two decades ago, I thought it a vivid example of an author's use of voice. The story has stayed with me, probably because of Billie Jo's spirit—her absolutely authentic combination of vulnerability and steely determination.

Hesse's free verse propels the narrative and also lends the tale a sparse beauty, even in the face of the family's harsh environment.

Brown earth rained down
from sky.
I could not catch my breath
the way the dust pressed on my chest
and wouldn't stop.
The dirt blew down so thick
it scratched my eyes
and stung my tender skin,
it plugged my nose and filled inside my mouth.
No matter how I pressed my lips together
the dust made muddy tracks
across my tongue.

But Hesse also delivers this:

"After the baby is born,
those apples will be ready
and we'll make sauce
and pudding
and dumplings
and cake
and cobbler
and have just plain apples to take to school
and slice with my pocket knife
and eat one juicy piece at a time
until my mouth is clean
and fresh
and my breath is nothing but apple."



Following a pivotal tragedy, a stricken Billie Jo somehow endures. She wavers once, but then, with a toughness that would be impressive for an adult, let alone a 13-year-old, she continues with the business of living. And sometimes, after shaking out the ever-present dust from the napkins on the dining room table and flipping over the glasses and plates to expose clean little circles in the dirt, she sits down to a meal and gradually becomes reacquainted with her

hardworking father. She begins to make music again and remains hopeful for the occasional rain that brings growth and renewal to the parched earth of her prairie home.

Billie Jo's capacity for perseverance and love makes *Out of the Dust* well worth a read for both children and adults.

The book earned not only a Newbery Medal but also a Scott O'Dell Award and was a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, an ALA Notable Children's Book, and an ALA Best Book for Young Adults.

—Lynn Nowak



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◆ *The Marriage Portrait*

Maggie O'Farrell (2022)

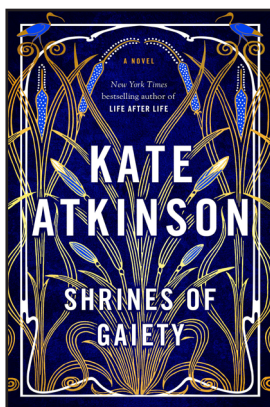
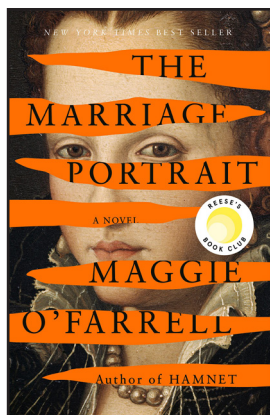
As a huge fan of Maggie O'Farrell's Shakespeare-inspired novel *Hamnet*, I was eager to read this latest book, a historical novel about the life of Lucrezia, third daughter of the Florentine Duke Cosimo de' Medici. It did not disappoint. Once again, O'Farrell has taken the wispiest threads of historical fact and woven them into a lush and detailed tapestry of a life little known.

Lucrezia, both in history and in this novel, is betrothed at the age of thirteen to Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, when her elder sister Maria's sudden death leaves the carefully negotiated marriage contract unfulfilled. The historical Lucrezia was dead within a year of her wedding. In *The Marriage Portrait*, O'Farrell imagines Lucrezia's childhood in Florence as a dreamy, artistic, observant, and sometimes wild girl, a daughter of privilege and wealth but largely innocent of the world outside her family. The novel moves back and forth in time as Lucrezia meets her intended husband, weds, and leaves Florence and everything she has ever known for a new life in Ferrara.

The court of Ferrara, however, is not as secure as the one she has left behind; there are undercurrents in the royal family she does not quite understand, alliances that shut her out of her new husband's orbit, customs and dialect she must learn from scratch. Shuttled between various royal residences, Lucrezia feels both a newfound sense of freedom and a lurking sense of dread as she begins to believe that her new husband, who must surely love her, also surely wants her dead. Increasingly isolated, she holds fast to the things that matter most to her: her memories, her determination, and her overwhelming love of art and her own creativity.

Here's the real magic of O'Farrell's story, and of her gorgeous writing style: I was certain how this tale would end from the very beginning, yet I consumed the book in one compulsive gulp, unable to look away from the train wreck I was sure would come. And then, with a master's stroke, O'Farrell (and Lucrezia) surprised me. Fiction just doesn't get any better than that.

—Kristine Kaufman



◆ *Shrines of Gaiety*

Kate Atkinson (2022)

London in the heady days of the 1920s is the setting for Kate Atkinson's wonderful new novel, *Shrines of Gaiety*. A deliciously layered confection of ambitions, deceptions, and betrayals, this tale is told with Atkinson's trademark sly sense of humor and unerring tension, peopled with an unforgettable cast of characters and all topped off with the glitter and swank of London's Soho nightclubs.

At the center is Nellie Coker, the self-made empress of London nightlife and matriarch of a complicated family. We meet her just as she exits the gates of Holloway Prison, having served a six-month sentence and now ready to return to the running of her clubs. Waiting for Nellie are her six children, a doggedly diligent police inspector named Frobisher, and an unknown somebody angling to take over the Coker empire. Add to that mix two young girls hoping to make it big on the London stage; an independent-minded spinster named Gwendolen King, who has come from York to track down said girls; plus a whole host of other well-drawn and memorable characters, and it's easy to see why so many reviewers have attached the word *Dickensian* to this book.

Shrines of Gaiety has everything I like in a novel: great atmosphere and a distinctive setting, characters that both attract and repel, and plenty of tension and suspense to keep me guessing until the very end. Like Atkinson's other novels—from *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* to *Life After Life*—this book is perhaps hard to categorize but very easy to read and enjoy.

—KK


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Newsletters are available online, at the library, Food Co-op, Visitor Center, and elsewhere

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We are open **Mondays and Thursdays, 12:30-4:30** (for now). All sales are by donation. We look forward to seeing you there!

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The Friends of the Port Townsend Library, established in 1978, supports programs, services, and materials beyond what the city's library budget covers. Every year we fund reading programs, events, and activities for all ages; we also hold book sales and publish three newsletters. Newsletters are available in the library, around town, and at friendsofptlibrary.org.

Our funding comes primarily from supporters, donations, and book sales. We invite anyone to become a Friend and attend our board meetings, which take place on the second Wednesday of each month, 3:30 PM, usually at the Library Learning Center (corner of Lawrence and Harrison). Please contact us by email at friendsofptlibrary@gmail.com for updates.

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