

## Book Review

### *The Serviceberry*

By Robin Wall Kimmerer (Scribner Books, New York, NY, 2024)

Reviewed by Scott Fulton, February 27, 2025

This short but wonderful book came to me as a gift of hopeful light in what is, in so many ways, a dark and fearful time.

The plants referred to in the title are shrubs or small trees found in the wild across North America. They bloom like clockwork when the ground first thaws and later produce a profusion of flavorful and nutritious berries that are like a cross between blueberries and tiny apples. These plants go by many names – Serviceberry, Juneberry, Shadbush, Sugarplum, Saskatoon, Sarvis, etc. Botanists refer to them as the various species of the genus *Amelanchier*; the Potawatomi as *bozakmin*, meaning “the best of the berries”.

Like all living beings, serviceberries exist in a vast web of relations with whom they give and receive many gifts. Their flowers provide food for early season insects like bumblebees, who spread the pollen far and wide to fertilize other serviceberries. They are a host plant for the larvae of many butterflies, and a preferred browse for deer and moose. Their berries provide a midsummer feast for birds of many kinds, who in turn spread the seeds over great distances. People have also used them since time immemorial. Serviceberries were a key ingredient (along with dried meat) for *pemmican* – the original travel food bar.

Taking the example of the serviceberry as a lesson, this book explores the idea of the “gift economy”, a distinguishing aspect of essentially all indigenous cultures. This is an economy rooted in ongoing reciprocal relationships which provide amply for our needs, in our sense of the true abundance of life, and in our gratitude for that abundance. Reciprocity here means doing your part to keep everything flowing, rather than individual *quid pro quo* exchanges. Wealth in a gift economy is measured by how much you can give to others in providing for your community, not in how much you can take and accumulate for yourself.

An example – I receive the gift of berries given by the plants and bake a tasty pie, which I give to my neighbor after she helps me prepare our shared garden for the season. She, in turn, shares it with her family and is so moved by the abundance of wonderful food in her life that she decides to volunteer in the local food bank. And on and on . . .

Although this may seem like an idealistic view of how things could work, we all have many experiences of the gift economy in our own lives. They begin with the care given to us by our

mothers and continuing in the “internal economy” of healthy families. Churches, community groups, and volunteer organizations operate this way. The gift economy is not limited to times and places of great abundance either. During natural and human disasters, when even the necessities of life are in critically short supply, people very often tend to band together in what is essentially a gift economy, sharing what resources they have, and working together as needed to help everyone survive.

Of course, the “real economy” does not work this way. We are conditioned to believe that the “real world” is one in which we all fiercely compete for scarce resources, where all economic relationships are transactionally based and mediated by the exchange of money, and where the endless growth of what we can take for ourselves from the world is the key to our prosperity. This is why economics is often called “the dismal science”. This worldview is also very clearly the source of the great crisis in which we find ourselves today.

There are certainly challenges and questions. What do we do about people who “cheat the system”? How large could this possibly scale? Can the idea of the gift economy really be a way to save ourselves and our planet? I don’t know, but it certainly feels like a ray of Light and Truth that we need to seriously consider in this time.

The author of *The Serviceberry*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, is a mother, scientist, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. A botanist and plant ecologist, Kimmerer is a Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology at the State University of New York, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. In 2022 Kimmerer was named a MacArthur “Genius Grant” Fellow.

Kimmerer’s book *Braiding Sweetgrass* has become a beloved classic in the literature of nature and the environment, with its message of drawing upon the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific knowledge for our shared goals of sustainability. If you have not read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I would very highly recommend you do so. You can get a sense of Kimmerer’s overall message in this video of brief talk given in 2019 – [What Does the Earth Ask of Us?: Questions for a Resilient Future Robin Wall Kimmerer](#)

One of the great tragedies of the long interaction between the colonial settler Americans and the indigenous peoples of North America is that, in our zeal to take all of the land and resources and assimilate the Indians into what we believed to be our manifestly superior society, we largely failed to even try to understand the cultures that had developed independently here over many millennia. We never really listened to the many wise things they might teach us. Fortunately, they are still here and are still speaking to us. *The Serviceberry* is a beautiful example of what we so clearly need to learn from them today.