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The Beautiful World of Mosses

September 21, 2003

By **Laura T. Ryan**
Staff writer

Robin Kimmerer ambles over the wide smooth slabs of limestone rock, careful not to let a toe slip into the deep fissures between them.

The only sound comes from the hum of distant crickets or cicadas (maybe both), and the delicate scraping against rock as a falling leaf lands.

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It's a near-perfect, late-summer morning unfolding at Clark Reservation State Park in Jamesville, as sunlight streaks through the leafy canopy and falls in radiant patches. But Kimmerer doesn't stand back to admire the view.

Instead, she leans in close and pinches off a piece of green furry moss from a rock, and holds it between her fingers like a semi-precious stone. For Kimmerer, who teaches botany at State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry and specializes in mosses, the view gets no better than this up-close panorama.

"They're so beautiful," Kimmerer, 50, of Fabius, says of mosses. "For me, it's the aesthetic and the sense of discovery, because you always walked by this beautiful little world you didn't know was there before."

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Kimmerer stopped walking past mosses years ago, when she was an undergraduate botany major at the forestry school.

Simply by looking, she says she discovered a forest in miniature. And she quickly developed an abiding appreciation for these simple plants, and built a teaching and research career around them.

She earned a master's degree in bryology (the study of mosses), then a doctorate in plant ecology. In 1993, she returned to her alma mater to join the faculty. And in April, Oregon State University Press published Kimmerer's first book, a collection of essays that testify to her love of mosses - as plants and as metaphors for life.

"Looking at mosses makes you love the world a little more," Kimmerer says.

The essays in "Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses" (\$17.95), resonate with poetry instead of scientific jargon. In them, Kimmerer draws parallels between her life as a mother, Native American and bryologist and the inspirational resilience of mosses.

For example, in an essay exploring mosses' ability to wait for a rejuvenating infusion of water during a dry season, she intersperses passages about waiting in an airport for her daughter to return home from college.

"What art of waiting is practiced by the mosses, crisped and baking on the summer oak? They curl inward upon themselves, as if suspended in daydreams. And if mosses dream, I suspect they dream of rain," Kimmerer writes. ". . . Mosses have a covenant with change; their destiny is linked to the vagaries of rain. They shrink and shrivel while carefully laying the groundwork of their own renewal. They give me faith."

In another piece, Kimmerer describes finding starfish after a long search in a North Pacific tide pool, and makes the larger point that the best way to find something is not to go looking for it.

"And then it was as if a curtain had been pulled away and I saw them everywhere," Kimmerer writes. "Like stars revealing themselves one by one in a darkening summer night. Orange stars in the crevice of a black rock, speckled burgundy stars with outstretched arms, purple stars nestled together like a family huddled against the cold. In a cascade of discovery, the invisible was suddenly made visible."

All of Kimmerer's writing up until "Gathering Moss" has been for peer-review scientific journals, and required the technical writing of a scientist.

An exploration of moss demanded something different.

"I couldn't tell the truth about mosses if I only used the scientific voice," Kimmerer says. "I like the idea as mosses as metaphors for other things," Kimmerer says.

Mosses can also be our teachers, she says. From them, we can learn that small is beautiful, for example.

"Society generally thinks to be small is to be unsuccessful somehow," Kimmerer says. "But their smallness is their strength. I think that's a powerful idea."

Another lesson to be learned: Do more with less.

We learn this lesson by observing mosses' ability to survive dry

conditions.

"When it rains, they're wet and alive and flourishing," Kimmerer explains. "When it's dry, they're just waiting. It's like suspended animation. They're superbly adapted to life on the rock. . . . They take what they can get and flourish."

Kimmerer's Potawatomi heritage helps her remain open to nature's lessons, she says.

"The way I see the world enables me to see mosses as teachers, as non-human persons with stories to tell," she says. "The idea of being able to tell other species' stories, that's important to me."

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