Books in Brief

'Moss' is sure to grow on you

When I used to work as a park ranger at Arches National Park, one of my favorite tricks was to take a group of visitors to an innocuous, brown, somewhat fuzzy-looking patch of ground and pour water on it. Within seconds what had appeared to be dead turned bright green and miraculously came back to life.

I was always astonished at how moss could impress people. I now know that my little escape highlighted just one of the amazing aspects of moss, one of the most common and yet overlooked groups of plants on Earth.

Fortunately, someone with passion and knowledge has chosen to educate us about these miraculous little plants. In "Gathering Moss," Robin Wall Kimmerer, a biologist specializing in bryology (the study of moss and liverworts), has written as good a book as you will find on a natural-history subject. You will want to go outside and get on your knees with a hand lens and begin to probe this Lilliputian world she describes so beautifully.

We learn that mosses emerged out of the water 350 million years ago and that, lacking a vascular system such as trees have, they cannot conduct water well and therefore remain low-growing. This does not mean they are not successful. More than 22,000 species thrive on surfaces as diverse as pavement, bark, beetle backs, poop and roofs, no doubt due to the fact that they "exhibit the entire range of reproductive behaviors from uninhibited sexual frenzy to puritanical abstention."

Each chapter focuses on a single species or group of species, an aspect of moss ecology, or how mosses help scientists understand larger ecological questions.

They mix understandable analogies, enjoyable anthropocentrism, fascinating science and personal insights.
By the end, Kimmerer has enticed us into her realm of the small, making the world that much more interesting.

— David B. Williams

The high plains of South Dakota and three women with wounded psyches are the focus of Kent Nelson's eventful new novel, "Land That Moves, Land That Stands Still."

Just a few pages beyond the book's incandescent opening, 44-year-old Mattie Remmel loses her husband in a farm accident. A meeting with the family lawyer reveals a couple of stipulations in her husband's will that take Mattie by surprise and lead her on a quest to discover some important things her husband concealed from her.

Meanwhile, Mattie needs help to keep the farm going. Daughter Shelley leaves college and a phlegmatic boyfriend to come back home and lend a hand. A newspaper ad for a hired man turns up Dawn, who is a wiz as a mechanic but who needs to lie low for a while to let unmentionable events from her recent past blow over. Elton, a runaway kid from over the state line, rounds out this unlikely team.

While they struggle with the skeletons in their individual closets, additional plot wrinkles occur in the way of redneck neighbors, who make no bones about their antipathy toward the women, and the director of the local paleontology museum, who wants permission to dig on the farm for prehistoric fossils.

Even tucked away on a remote farm, these characters seem to be magnets for trials and tribulations. Over the course of a summer, they are involved in several jarringly violent events. Their past and present love lives, which Nelson presents in graphically sexual form, offer scant solace.

All this, and Mattie has an alfalfa crop to bring in, too.

Nelson creates memorable characters in "Land That Moves, Land That Stands Still," and his descriptions of the landscape are starkly beautiful. But unrestrained dramatic bluster threatens to overshadow these.

— Barbara Lloyd McMichael

"Fiddle Dee Death" is a Nancy Drew mystery for grown-ups on a side trip to Tara.

This debut novel, written by "one-and-a-half times" first cousins (Nancy Pate, Meg Herndon and Gail Greer) under the pseudonym Caroline Cousins, is a fun little mystery. It offers a romp through South Carolina's Low County complete with a plantation, a murder, a ghost, family secrets and a race through the dunes. Toss in a love interest with the local sheriff,
stray bullets and some old bones, and you have the makings of an entertaining read.

The book is rich in description of island life and family interaction. You'll easily find yourself joining the three amateur sleuths — who also happen to be cousins — in a merry chase while solving the murder of Indigo Island's historical society director. You may also pause to worry about the appropriateness of wearing green to his funeral.

The plot progresses swiftly and holds a few surprise twists and turns. However, the book's real strength is the warm, chatty dialogue among the crime-solving cousins. They are as inviting as a pair of well-worn jeans.

And, yes, it is OK to wear green to a funeral — at least on the cousins' island.

— Lynne Berry