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What are you reading?

Kimmerer, R. W. (2024). *The Serviceberry. An Economy of Gifts and Abundance*. London: Allen Lane.

Review by Teun van Son
PhD candidate at University of Antwerp
teun.vanson@uantwerpen.be

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As I am sitting at my desk, struggling to write out the first sentences of this text, I think of all the gifts that made it possible for me to be here. Online services like Wikipedia and, yes, Sci-Hub, allow me to access some of the massive wealth of knowledge that humanity has amassed. Free internet radio, supported by donations, is playing in the background. Looking outside, the rain – the first in days – sustains the crops that I will eventually get to eat to stay alive. And of course the sun, the biggest gift of all, gives warmth to humans, energy to plants, and keeps countless Earthly processes going.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's short book *The Serviceberry* – about the length of an overgrown essay – does not so much provide us with brand-new insights as it invites us to appreciate ancient ones. It is, if nothing else, an ode to the idea of the gift economy. Gifts, she writes, are everywhere. We just need to learn to appreciate them and pass them on (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 47–48). These gifts can come from non-humans or humans alike. But in our current era, we would do well to look to non-human nature for inspiration. Kimmerer doesn't suggest that we do so in an idealizing way – nature, for her, is not a zone of perfection where all our questions will be answered, or where city-dwellers can go to 'heal'. Rather, she notes how differently humans do things from all other life on Earth, and suggests ways of learning from the non-human world that can be applied to rural and urban contexts alike.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, a tribe of Potawatomi people in what is now known as Oklahoma, United States. She is also an ecologist and botanist, working as a Distinguished Teaching Professor at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She is known to combine her knowledge of indigenous environmental wisdom with academic insights in biology and ecology. In *The Serviceberry*, she adds another chapter to that journey by taking on economic systems.

She describes, for instance, how non-human beings do not hoard like capitalist humans do; they produce and collect, sure, but they also share in abundance. This sharing creates systems of reciprocity that do not rely on one-to-one exchanges, like the human market system, but on generous giving and taking what one needs. With the serviceberry or *Amelanchier* as her primary guide, Kimmerer explores ways in which these non-human gift economies can inspire alternatives to human-made capitalism.

I had encountered many of these ideas before, in Kimmerer's wonderful book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2020). However, *The Serviceberry* specifically zooms in on the idea of the gift economy. For one, she engages with what I see as the most obvious critique of her approach, namely that the natural gift economies that she describes are actually fuelled by self-interest. On this view, plants and animals only engage in sharing activities to the extent that it benefits them personally. Kimmerer rightly points out that this view relies on a framework in biology – the 'modern synthesis', although she wisely avoids the jargon – that has long been critiqued and discredited by biologists (e.g. Margulis 1998; Corning 2020). Far from running on competition between individuals alone, ecosystems seem to thrive at least as much on mutualism and reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 75–78). While *The Serviceberry* presents this insight primarily from a Western science perspective – perhaps for strategic reasons – *Braiding Sweetgrass* taught me that indigenous science and practice have sustained the wisdom of a cooperative nature for many centuries. It is crucial to highlight that Western science is playing catch-up here: perhaps now us Western scholars are finally ready to listen and learn.

Another welcome addition to Kimmerer's previous work is a more thorough discussion of market economics. The fundamental difference between the capitalist market economy and gift economies is that the former runs on scarcity rather than abundance. The creation myth of the market economy says that scarcity is a natural state, and that the free market is a way to deal with that scarcity. But as Kimmerer points out, this scarcity is

artificially created by capitalism itself. Naturally abundant goods – water and berries, but also care and support – are continuously appropriated and paywalled so that individuals may profit from them (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 78–82).

The gift economy, on the other hand, starts from abundance (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 67–70). The Earth provides an affluence of goods and services, from clean water and fresh air to berries, maize, and wood. Instead of seeing these goods as nobody's and therefore fair game for appropriating and exploiting, a gift economy asks us to consider whose generosity produced them, who might need them, and what happens if we take them. Gift thinking also means asking ourselves what we can give in return – not because the gifts have a price, but because we want to keep the cycle of generosity going.

Importantly for me, *The Serviceberry* serves to remind us of the importance of the affective, the sensual, or what Audre Lorde would call 'the erotic' (Lorde 1978). This is crucial for me as a human being, but also for me as a researcher, since affectivity is often missing from academic discussions on environmental issues. My own research focuses on the role of ethics in posthumanist and ecofeminist approaches to environmental philosophy. These approaches tend to emphasize the entanglement between the non-human and the human, and thus throw the human off its carefully crafted pedestal. However, these texts are often densely written and difficult to understand even for the initiated. What Kimmerer has done with this book, is not only show that the human and non-human are connected, but also point out the deep joy and satisfaction that can come from honouring this connection. It is a rare book that uses simple and accessible language to twist our frames of thinking so that the normal becomes abnormal and vice versa. The essayistic style is bound to annoy some academics (I have to admit I wish it had numbered chapters, an index, and a bibliography), but is simultaneously its biggest strength.

Despite my own first impressions, Kimmerer is not interested in saving the world. As such, she is understandably hesitant to discuss ways in which gift economies might 'scale up': 'Why does everything have to be expanded?' (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 54). As I learned from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015), infinite scalability is a typically modernist ideal. Both in science and in economics, projects are only seen as successful if they are scalable; that is, if they can increase in size without changing their core framework. Once we resist this ideal, we can start seeing how local initiatives, however small, can make a difference. Borrowing from the generous words of Suzanne Simard (2021): *The Serviceberry* is not a book about how we can save the world; it is a book about how the world might save us, if only we can recognize the world's gifts for what they are.

Teun van Son

Teun van Son is a doctoral researcher at the University of Antwerp. His research project centres around ethical questions in more-than-human environmental philosophy. He is inspired and co-shaped in his thinking and doing by (eco)feminism, posthumanism, non-Western approaches to environmental issues, enactive cognitive science, and process ontologies.

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