

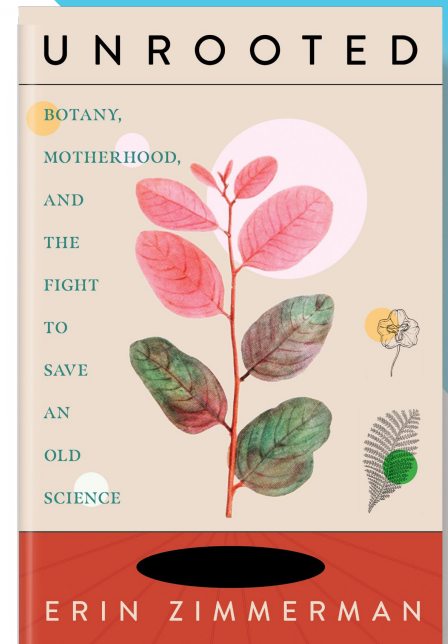
UNROOTED

Botany, Motherhood, and the Fight to Save an Old Science

Erin Zimmerman

Hardcover 9781685890704

eBook 9781685890711



“ Evolutionary botanist Zimmerman discusses her passion for plants and inveighs against sexism in the sciences in her marvelous debut memoir ... Throughout, Zimmerman’s enthusiasm and expertise make the science accessible even to those without a background in the subject. The results are as edifying as they are galvanizing.” — **Publishers Weekly, STARRED Review**

“ Erin Zimmerman has exposed a rooted gender failure in science. Her book is important not for this alone. Her work is essential for understanding the future resilience of all flora on this planet.”
— **Diana Beresford-Kroeger, author of *To Speak for the Trees***

SUMMARY

An exploration of science, motherhood, and academia, and a stirring account of a woman at a personal and professional crossroads . . .

Growing up in rural Ontario, Erin Zimmerman became fascinated with plants—an obsession that led to a life in academia as a professional botanist. While still an undergrad, Zimmerman’s university started the process of closing the Botany Department, a sign of waning funding for this research. But without its continuation, humanity loses a vital piece in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss.

Zimmerman delves into her experiences as a new mom, her decision to leave her position in post-graduate research, and how she found a new way to stay in the field she loves. But as her career choices narrowed in the face of failing institutions and subtle, but ubiquitous, sexism, Zimmerman began to doubt herself. How do you approach an environment that pushes out mothers and those with any outside responsibilities?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do plant collections and the sort of observational science that is done with them help to both understand and preserve species from extinction?
2. Taxonomy is referred to as “the foundation for all biology.” According to Zimmerman and her colleagues, there are many reasons behind its decline in modern scientific study. Name one and explain.
3. What are the similarities and differences between botanical illustrations and botanical photography? How are illustrations still relevant today, according to Zimmerman?

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- Is it possible to keep a comfortable work-life balance for young women in STEM today? How does Zimmerman argue this point throughout *Unrooted*, and do you agree or disagree?
- How is artificial intelligence being used to try to make up for the shortfall in working taxonomists? How do you think it might be used in other areas of botany or conservation?
- Zimmerman explains the phrase “citizen science.” What are some examples of modern citizen science and how does it stand to help conservation efforts?
- Being a parent and a scientist are two definitive personas that Zimmerman battles between in *Unrooted*. What are the compromises that she faces in motherhood? What are the compromises in her career? Is one more advantageous than the other? Explain.
- Statistically, women are less advantaged when pursuing a career in science than men. What are some measures that could be taken in the STEM workforce to decrease the “leaky pipeline” that women face, especially after childbirth?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Zimmerman is an evolutionary biologist turned science writer and essayist. She has a bachelor’s degree in plant biology and physics from the University of Guelph and postgraduate studies in fungal genetics and molecular systematics from the Université de Montréal’s biodiversity institute. For her doctoral research, she traveled to South America to collect plant specimens, and worked at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Zimmerman has published nine academic papers, as well as numerous essays that have appeared in publications such as *New York Magazine*, *Huffpost*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Undark*, and *Narratively*.

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