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Rachel Carson: the Life of the author of Silent Spring: A Book Review



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Rachel Carson can be considered the originator of the modern environmental movement. Born in poverty in 1907, she worked hard for everything she ever had in life. Her father died early, and her mother Maria struggled to raise three children who often had barely enough to eat. Rachel displayed an early interest in nature and her search for knowledge led to a scholarship to the Pennsylvania College for Women, a second-rate school where two teachers befriended and inspired her: Grace Croft in writing and Mary Skinker in biology.

At first, Rachel aimed for a career in writing, but as she became increasingly influenced by Skinker, she leaned toward biology. The two interests shaped her life. After PCW, again on scholarship and with hardly enough money for adequate clothing, Rachel attended Johns Hopkins and earned a master's degree in biology. With no money to continue toward a PhD, her formal education ended. Skinker encouraged Rachel to look for a summer job at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, MA. After a lifetime of attraction to the sea, she was finally able to live and study by it.

While seeking paid employment following her withdrawal from Johns Hopkins, Rachel found a two-year teaching position at the University of Maryland Dental and Pharmacy School. In 1936 she passed an examination and was appointed junior aquatic biologist in the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, largely to write teaching pamphlets. Rachel's career as a government scientist lasted more than fifteen years until financial success from her books enabled her to resign. During this time she published numerous essays and articles for popular magazines, always on nature, and began to receive recognition as a writer of ability.

Meanwhile, Rachel's personal life was strained. Her brother was a mean-spirited man, never loving or caring for her or the others. Rachel provided the only support to their mother. Her sister died of cancer, leaving two daughters to be cared for by Rachel. One niece bore a son, Roger, then she, too, died of cancer, leaving the boy to be raised by Rachel.

After she bought shore property on the coast of Maine, Rachel developed a close personal relationship with Dorothy Freeman, a married woman eight years her senior. Their quoted letters suggest they were lovers. Her other closest friends were Marie Rodell, her agent, and Paul Brooks, her ultimate editor at Houghton-Mifflin.

Rachel's first full length book, entitled *Under the Sea-Wind*, was published November 1941. It described the life of creatures of the sea and shore and was praised by William Beebe for its "lyrical beauty and faultless science." Despite outstanding reviews, book sales suffered from the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the entry of the U.S. into World War II one month later. Only 2,000 copies were sold.

Rachel was disappointed for several reasons, not the least being her desperate need for money. Still supporting herself chiefly by her government job, she lived frugally and did her best to care for her aging mother and the small boy left her by her niece. While continuing to write short articles for magazines, Rachel began gathering material for her next major book published in 1951 entitled *The Sea Around Us*. A far more complete study of marine life and its integration with the rest of nature, she decided to send an early sample to William Shawn, editor of the *New Yorker*. His enthusiasm led to publication first in abstract in the magazine, and soon thereafter in book form.

The public and scientific acceptance of the book surprised Rachel. It climbed rapidly to the top of the *New York Times* best seller list where it remained for several months. Reviewers were ecstatic. *Readers Digest* asked to publish an abridged edition. It won the National Book Award, the Burroughs Medal for excellence in nature writing, and was proclaimed by the *New York Times* as "outstanding book of 1951." More than 250,000 copies were sold by the end of the year. Rachel was finally on a sound financial footing and at a peak in her career.

There was so much publicity that Rachel became weary of the constant demands on her time, especially the countless invitations to speak and to receive honors. One man wrote to a newspaper saying he was sure "Rachel Carson" was a pseudonym for a male writer, for no woman could do such a job. A fellow scientist who met her for the first time said he had expected "a large and forbidding woman." In reality, Rachel stood 5' 4", weighed 115 lbs., and was described as very attractive.

There was great pressure to write more and she began gathering material for a book on shore birds and animals, much of it from the Maine coast near her house. The book appeared in 1955, entitled *The Edge of the Sea*. This time, William Shawn requested permission to publish it first in the *New Yorker*, which pleased Rachel as the publicity engendered seemed to enhance the sale of the book. Again, there was success and good ratings on the best seller lists, although not as high as for *The Sea Around Us*.

Soon after *The Edge of the Sea*, Rachel began writing her ultimate masterpiece, *Silent Spring*. While working on this book she discovered a lump in her breast. After a biopsy she asked if it was cancer and was told it was not, a lie on the part of the surgeon, never forgiven by the patient. She was treated by a radical mastectomy followed by radiation, and suffered side effects that slowed her writing. Her cancer spread progressively to lymph nodes, bones and her liver, resulting in more radiation and hormone treatment. Though in pain much of the time, she doggedly persisted in writing, disguising the illness from all but her most intimate friends, describing her disability as "arthritis."

Silent Spring, published in the *New Yorker* and by Houghton-Mifflin in 1962, is a description of man's attempts to control nature. The emphasis is on chemical pesticides and herbicides, their failure to control insects because of adaptation of the latter, and the terrible side effects on both the health of the environment and mankind.

The effects of the book on the public (and on Congress) were maximal. Public health laws changed. While suffering from advanced cancer that caused her death in 1964, Rachel, showered by honors and fame, was recognized as the greatest science writer alive. The pesticide industry tried to belittle her work, but unsuccessfully. This biography is very well executed, a portrait of a great human being as scientist-writer-crusader, working in the face of enormous odds in family and health.

Rachel's final words in *Silent Spring*:

"The control of nature" is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concepts and practices of

applied entomology for the most part date from that Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.

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