



Rachel Carson: The woman who shaped the environmental debate

By Antonia Zerbisias, Feature Writer

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There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example — where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices.

— Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*.

Earlier this month, U.S. giant Scotts Miracle-Gro Company was slapped with a \$12.5 million fine for 11 criminal violations of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA).

The world's largest producer of pesticides for lawn and garden use — “dedicated to a beautiful world” — had contaminated 73 million bags of its wild bird seed with toxic pesticides that kill birds.

The criminal penalties are the biggest since the act, which governs the manufacture, distribution and sale of pesticides, was passed in 1947.

That was around the time that Rachel Carson, then manager of what might now be called the communications branch of the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, was becoming concerned about the increasingly indiscriminate use of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane — DDT.

Hailed during the war years as the miracle that saved troops from typhus and malaria, DDT was sprayed on crops, forests, cities, even people — and was found in hundreds of consumer products, including supposed ant-repelling kitchen shelf paper.

It was everywhere, including where it should not have been.

But then, the fish and birds started to die off.

And that was just the beginning.

To Carson, a biologist, “man’s assaults upon the environment,” whether through pesticide pollution or nuclear testing fallout, was the “chain of evil.”

In 1962, she sounded the alarm in her poignant *Silent Spring*, which resonates still, 50 years after its publication.

“Rachel Carson is properly considered the godmother of the environmental movement, a founding figure, and *Silent Spring* is one of the founding texts,” notes filmmaker Mark Kitchell, producer and director of *A Fierce Green Fire*, a soon-to-be-released history of the environmental movement.

When the elegantly illustrated volume was published on Sept. 27, after causing a sensation as a serial in *The New Yorker*, the world would split into two groups — those who believe business should not trump Mother Nature, and those who subscribe to the notion that the planet is there to be exploited for profit.

While Carson wasn’t the first to write a book about the dangers of DDT, *Silent Spring* is credited with — or blamed for — its ultimate banning. It led to tighter regulation of pesticide use, an overhaul of FIFRA and the establishment, a decade later, of the Environmental Protection Agency.

All because her powerful polemic — listed among the greatest books of the 20th century and still in print — captured the imagination of the duck’n’cover Cold War generation, preying on their fears of doom and destruction from the skies.

Pesticides, Carson wrote, had their place — but that place did not include everywhere, and anywhere, and in any amount.

“Carson was not just a famous author. She was a beloved author. She was known not just in the United States but around the world,” says William Souder, author of the just-published *On a Farther Shore: the Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson*.

On the phone from his home in Grant, Minn., he paints a picture of this petite, frail and modest woman whose parents had to sell their home to put her through school, and who secretly battled cancer even as she struggled to finish her fourth and final bestseller.

“Her first three books were very different,” says Souder. “These were very lyrical books about the ocean; they were always described as poetic. And then she writes *Silent Spring*, a disturbing book, a difficult book. People couldn’t ignore it because, if Rachel Carson felt so strongly to write a book like that, there must have been something to it.

“She was a formidable talent, a formidable person and she was in the right place at the right time, all of which conspired to make history.”

Even before *Silent Spring* hit the stores, it was a game-changer.

It was pre-emptively attacked by agribusiness, the chemical industry, the pulp-and-paper sector, even food processors. DuPont Corp. demanded that publisher Houghton Mifflin hand over advance copies. Monsanto Magazine ran a devastating parody. Chemicals associations put together a \$250,000 “war chest” to promote the benefits of pesticides.

Carson was pilloried as a woman “scared to death of a few little bugs,” as un-American, determined to bring American industry down to the level of Iron Curtain countries.

The book was reviewed everywhere. More than 70 editorials were published, some by papers that also ran excerpts. There were Life pictorials, a CBS documentary, demands for speeches, calls for her to win a Nobel Prize.

It was as if, suddenly, the world had noticed chemical pollution — despite other scientists having written books about it prior to *Silent Spring*.

“People today tend to believe that nobody cared about DDT until Rachel Carson came along, which is not true,” insists University of Toronto associate professor of geography Pierre Desrochers, a co-editor of *Silent Spring at 50: The False Crises of Rachel Carson*. It was published this month by the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

“A lot of people, in popular outlets, not just the scientific literature, made fair and balanced criticism of the way DDT was being used at the time,” adds Desrochers. “The reason why those other guys have been forgotten is because of the imagery that Carson used. An America where there are no birds left to sing. An America where there is a cancer epidemic attributable to DDT. And even though she might have been more nuanced than that in her book, the popular perception was really amenable to these metaphors.

Since then, Carson has been spuriously convicted of “genocide,” and attacked as an “eco-imperialist” for killing millions of African children because DDT was not being freely used against malarial mosquitoes. *RachelWasWrong.Org* was founded by the right-wing Competitive Enterprise Institute to tout DDT as a life-saving “miracle.” *JunkScience.com*, maintained by former oil and tobacco lobbyist and Fox News regular Steven J. Milloy, also a fellow at a number of right-wing think tanks, still has a malarial “death clock” page with Carson’s picture on it.

She never got to respond to her critics. A scant 20 months after *Silent Spring* was published, she died of cancer, at age 56.

Which could explain why controversy, and not her actual words, might be Carson’s enduring legacy.

“I do think that in pushing her argument to the left side of the political spectrum and by putting economic and political interests on the other side, the right side, we got the outline of the environmental debate that we have today,” posits Souder. “If you look at an issue like climate change, it gets argued out in exactly the same way that the pesticide issue was argued — economic interests versus science that people tend to dismiss if it’s contrary to their political position or ideology.

“The terms of the environmental debate, the outlines of who stands where on the environment, these were all set and established in 1962 with the publication of Silent Spring.”