



## Carson's 'Silent Spring' spurred environmental movement

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Rachel Carson wasn't someone you'd expect to spark a movement. She was a quiet, petite woman who grew up poor, lived most of her life with her mother and relished solitary walks along the beach, watching birds and fish.

Yet 50 years ago Thursday, this marine biologist published *Silent Spring*, widely credited with spurring the modern environmental movement. Her book warned of the dangers of indiscriminate spraying of synthetic pesticides, prompting grass-roots activism that led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and EPA's ban on most domestic uses of DDT in 1972.

"*Silent Spring* is such a watershed event. Very few books have had the same impact on public policy," says William Souder, author of *On A Farther Shore: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson*. "It's the fault line between conservation, which dominated the first half of the 20th century" and today's more politically divisive environmentalism, he says.

The "nun of nature," as Carson was sometimes called, still prompts debate. Critics have seized on the 50th anniversary to question her work while supporters use it to highlight their causes,

"The current fight against pesticides ... reveals that the battle Carson began decades ago is not over," says Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

"One of the worst sins she committed in writing *Silent Spring* was to provide an unbalanced view" that overstated DDT's harm and the role of the environment in causing cancer, says Jerry Taylor, who helped edit a book released this month by the libertarian Cato Institute, entitled *The False Crises of Rachel Carson: Silent Spring at 50*.

Both sides agree that Carson was a gifted writer whose three acclaimed best-selling books on sea life aroused in readers a sense of wonder about nature. Her lyricism didn't come easy. Her biographer Linda Lear, author of *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, says Carson would write sentences over and over and read them aloud to herself before asking her mother to read them as well. Her mother, Maria, typed up revisions.

Her gift, though, came early. Born in 1907 and raised in a four-room house without indoor plumbing on a family farm in Springdale, Pa., Carson managed to publish her first story on nature at age 11. Unlike her two older siblings, who didn't finish high school, she went to Pennsylvania College for Women -- now Chatham University -- in Pittsburgh on a scholarship. She earned a master's degree in zoology from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

To support her family, especially after her father died and she became the sole breadwinner, she landed a job in 1936 as an aquatic biologist who wrote and edited material for what's now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

She didn't quit her day job until her second book, *The Sea Around Us*, became a commercial success in 1952. She then built a summer cottage on Maine's Southport Island, where she met Dorothy Freeman, a married woman who became her lifelong soul mate. Lear says their relationship was close but not sexual.

Carson never married but helped raise three children alongside her mother. She took in two nieces when her sister died and, when one of the nieces died, she adopted her grand-nephew Roger in 1957.

By the time she began *Silent Spring* the next year, Lear says Carson was an "international literary superstar" and a "trusted voice on science for the public." She didn't initially want to write the "poison book" because of its likely controversy, but she felt obliged to warn people of the prevalent use of pesticides.

"She knew there would be a lot of pushback," says Souder, adding she probably didn't anticipate just how personal or political it would become. Although Carson didn't call for a ban on DDT -- only for its discriminate use -- and her book was a synthesis of research done by others, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI investigated her and the chemical industry painted her as Soviet agent intent on destroying American agriculture.

Unlike her earlier trilogy of sea books, *Silent Spring* is dark and unsettling. Halfway through its writing, in 1960, she found out her breast cancer had metastasized.

"Then everything changed in her life," Lear says. "Her language got more apocalyptic. She realized she might not live to write another book...so she better say all she had to say in this one. " She died at age 56 in 1964, only 18 months after the book was published.

"I don't think she started the environmental movement. I think she inspired it," Lear says. She says Carson's legacy -- her central message -- is a warning that if people harm nature, nature might harm them back. Had she lived longer, Lear says, "she'd be terribly surprised that she's become such a controversial and mythical figure."

"These sprays, dusts and aerosols are now applied almost universally to farms, gardens, forests and homes -- non-selective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the "good" and the "bad"... Can anyone believe it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life? They should not be called 'insecticides' but 'biocides.'"

"All this is not to say there is no insect problem and no need of control. I am saying, rather, that ... the methods employed must be such that they do not destroy us along with the insects."

"We have subjected enormous numbers of people to contact with these poisons without their consent and often without their knowledge."

"It is ironic to think that man might determine his own future by something so seemingly trivial as the choice of an insect spray."

"Man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself."

"In nature nothing exists alone."