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Rachel Carson

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About this Person

Born: May 27, 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania, United States

Died: April 14, 1964 in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Biologist

Other Names: Carson, Rachel Louise; Carson, Rachel L.

Updated: July 7, 2017

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born May 27, 1907, in Springdale, PA; died of cancer, April 14, 1964, in Silver Spring, MD; daughter of Robert Warden and Maria Frazier (McLean) Carson. **Education:** Pennsylvania College for Women, A.B., 1929; Johns Hopkins University, A.M., 1932; further graduate study at the Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, MA. **Religion:** Presbyterian. **Memberships:** American Ornithologists' Union, National Institute of Arts and Letters, Royal Society of Literature (fellow), Audubon Society (director in Washington, D.C.), Society of Women Geographers.

CAREER:

University of Maryland, College Park, member of the zoology staff, 1931-36; U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (now the Fish and Wildlife Service), Washington, D.C., aquatic biologist, beginning, 1936, editor in chief, 1949-52; full-time writer, 1952-64. Instructor at Johns Hopkins University, summers, 1930-36.

AWARDS:

Eugene Saxton Memorial fellowship, 1949; George Westinghouse Science Writing Award, 1950; National Book Award, 1952, for *The Sea Around Us*; Guggenheim fellowship, 1951-52; John Burroughs Medal, 1952; Henry G. Bryant Gold Medal, 1952; Page-One Award, 1952; Frances K. Hutchinson Medal, 1952; Silver Jubilee Medal from Limited Editions Club, 1954; book award from National Council of Women in the U.S., 1956; achievement award from American Association of University Women, 1956; Schweitzer Medal from Animal Welfare Institute, 1962; Women's National Book Association Constance Lindsay Skinner Award, 1963; New England Outdoor Writers Association Award, 1963; Conservationist of the Year Award from National Wildlife Federation, 1963; achievement award from Einstein College of Medicine, 1963; Gold Medal from New York Zoological Society; special citations from the Garden Club of America, the Pennsylvania Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Izaak Walton League of America, 1963. D.Sc. from Oberlin College, 1952; D.Litt. from Pennsylvania College for Women, 1952, Drexel Institute of Technology, 1952, and Smith College, 1953.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Under the Sea-Wind: A Naturalist's Picture of Ocean Life*, illustrated by Howard French, Simon & Schuster, 1941, new edition, Oxford University Press, 1952, reprinted, New American Library, 1978.
- *Food from the Sea: Fish and Shellfish of New England*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943.
- *Food from Home Waters: Fishes of the Middle West*, U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, 1943.
- *Fish and Shellfish of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coasts*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944.
- *Fish and Shellfish of the Middle Atlantic Coast*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945.
- *The Sea Around Us* (also see below), illustrated by Katherine L. Howe, Oxford University Press, 1951, revised edition, Watts, 1966, reprinted, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- *The Edge of the Sea*, illustrated by Bob Hines, Houghton, 1955, reprinted, 1980, reprinted with a new introduction by Sue

Hubbell, 1998.

- *Silent Spring*, illustrated by Lois Darling and Louis Darling, Houghton, 1962, limited edition, Limited Editions Club, 1980, 25th anniversary edition, Houghton, 1987.
- *The Sense of Wonder*, Harper, 1965, reprinted, Perennial Library, 1984.
- *Life Under the Sea* (selection from *The Sea Around Us*), Golden Press, 1968.
- *The Rocky Coast*, Macmillan, 1971.
- *The House of Life: Rachel Carson at Work* (selections), edited by Paul Brooks, Houghton, 1972.
- *Silent Spring Revisited*, American Chemical Society, 1987.
- *Always, Rachel: The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1952-1964*, edited by Martha Freeman, Beacon, 1995.
- *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson*, edited and with an introduction by Linda Lear, Beacon Press (Boston), 1998.

Sidelights

Rachel Carson combined her interest in nature and her desire to write into a very successful career. She acquired her love of nature from her mother, who introduced her to the marvels of the outdoors and its creatures. As early as age ten, her writing ability was manifested in contributions to the *St. Nicholas Magazine*.

Under the Sea-Wind, Carson's first book, grew out of an essay entitled "*Undersea*," which was published in the *Atlantic* in 1937. Reviews of the book, which appeared four years later, included one by a *Books* contributor: "Carson's unemotional handling of her subject matter is anything but dull. There is drama in every sentence. She rouses our interest in this ocean world and we want to watch it." A *Scientific Book Club Review* critic observed: "Not since the publication of *Salar the Salmon* has there been a volume so replete with information about sea life as this book by Rachel Carson.... In the three parts of the book, Miss Carson employs the device of weaving her story around certain individual creatures, although so many other animal 'personages' appear that a paradoxical sense of orderly confusion is conveyed. Here is the darting, swooping, preying struggle that has been going on for untold centuries.... There is poetry here, but no false sentimentality." William Beebe in *Saturday Review of Literature* commented: "The plethora of facts occasionally smothers the smoothness of diction, and distracts the attention from the word picture itself.... This is not captious criticism, but an appeal for more simple words, fewer terms of physical and faunal geography, and a greater leisureliness in description."

Carson's second effort, *The Sea Around Us*, required a vast amount of research and two years to write, but resulted in a National Book Award in 1952. A *Christian Science Monitor* critic commented, "Rachel Carson has achieved that rare, all but unique phenomenon--a literary work about the sea that is comparable with the best, yet offends neither the natural scientist nor the poet." "Rare indeed," added a contributor to the *Saturday Review of Literature*, "is the individual who can present a comprehensive and well-balanced picture of such a complex entity as the sea in an easy and fluent style and in terms anyone can understand. Rachel Carson is such an individual. Many books have been written on the sea, most of them by scholars with a very detailed knowledge of some aspect of oceanography, but with a limited knowledge of popular presentation. Miss Carson's book is different." Observed a *Nation* reviewer: "Scientifically, *The Sea Around Us* has its shortcomings, but it would be hard to find a style, a sensitivity, a balancing of detail more perfectly suited for the evoking of the sea." Several chapters of the book originally appeared in the *New Yorker* in the summer of 1951, under the title, "*Profile of the Sea*." A chapter entitled "*Birth of an Island*" was published earlier in the *Yale Review*, and won for its author the George Westinghouse Foundation Award, given for outstanding scientific writing in a periodical. By October, 1951, sales of the book--338,000 hardcover copies--had carried it to a ninth printing, and to first place on nonfiction best-seller lists. A documentary film of the book was made by RKO, which won an Academy Award for best documentary of feature length in 1952.

"Again author Carson has shown her remarkable talent for catching the breath of science on the still glass of poetry," wrote a *Time* critic about *The Edge of the Sea*. According to a *Christian Science Monitor* contributor, "*The Edge of the Sea* is pitched, perhaps, in a lesser key than was *The Sea Around Us*, if only because the intertidal world is a more limited subject than was the whole sea itself. In her new book, Miss Carson's pen is as poetic as ever and the knowledge she imparts is profound. *The Edge of the Sea* finds a worthy place beside [her] ... masterpiece of 1951." Added a *Saturday Review* critic: "The book has a notable feature: it appeals both to the mind's eye and to the physical eye.... The double impact is much stronger than if the two impressions came separately, and so *The Edge of the Sea* becomes the product of two naturalists working in close cooperation, each one scientifically trained and each an artist, the one with a pen and the other with a pencil [Bob Hines]. Together they take us on a good journey."

Silent Spring was probably Rachel Carson's most influential, as well as most controversial book. The work, which sold over 500,000 hardcover copies, is an indictment of farmers for the use of poisonous chemical fertilizers, and points out the potentially dangerous effects of these on animals, birds, and humans. Called "a shocking and frightening book" by a *Christian Century* contributor, it was further critiqued by the *Christian Science Monitor*, which noted: "Miss Carson has undeniably sketched a one-sided picture. But her distortion is akin to that of the painter who exaggerates to focus attention on essentials. It is not the half-truth of the propagandist." Added a *Saturday Review* contributor: "It is a devastating, heavily documented, relentless attack upon human carelessness, greed, and irresponsibility.... If her present book does not possess the beauty of *The Sea Around Us*, it is because she has courageously chosen, at the height of her powers, to educate us upon a sad, an unpleasant, an unbeautiful topic, and one of our own making." Intense public concern created over the book caused President John F. Kennedy to announce a federal investigation into the problem. The report of the President's Science Advisory Committee, issued in May, 1963, agreed with the basic premise of *Silent Spring*, warning against the indiscriminate use of pesticides and urging stricter controls and more research.

Rachel Carson was in the process of finishing *The Sense of Wonder* at the time of her death from cancer in 1964. A *Publishers*

Weekly reviewer observed: "The late [Rachel] Carson shares her delight in the miracles of nature, and shows one how to communicate this delight to a child, and how to share his sense of wonder. A treat for sore eyes and weary hearts."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Anticaglia, Elizabeth, *Twelve American Women*, Nelson-Hall, 1975.
- Archer, Jules, *To Save the Earth: The American Environmental Movement*, Viking (New York City), 1998.
- Brooks, Paul, editor, *House of life: Rachel Carson at Work*, Houghton, 1972.
- Burby, Liza N., *Rachel Carson: Writer and Environmentalist*, PowerKids Press (New York City), 1997.
- Lear, Linda J., *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, H. Holt (New York City), 1997.
- Presnall, Judith Janda, *Rachel Carson* (juvenile biography), Lucent Books (San Diego), 1995.
- Ravage, Barbara, *Rachel Carson: Protecting Our Environment*, Raintree Steck-Vaughn (Austin, Texas), 1997.
- Schlank, Carol Hilgartner, *A Clean Sea: The Rachel Carson Story: A Biography for Young Children*, Cascade Press (Culver City, CA), 1994.
- Sterling, Philip, *Sea and Earth: The Life of Rachel Carson*, Crowell, 1970.

PERIODICALS

- *American Forests*, July, 1970.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, July 5, 1951, November 10, 1955, September 27, 1962.
- *Life*, October 12, 1962.
- *Time*, November 7, 1955.

OBITUARIES:

PERIODICALS

- *New York Times*, April 15, 1964.
- *Publishers Weekly*, April 27, 1964.

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