

# Silent Spring



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RACHEL CARSON

Rachel Carson was an important figure in modern American environmentalism, whose work is sometimes credited with creating the grassroots movement that led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). She grew up in efforts in Pennsylvania, and then earned a master's in zoology from Johns Hopkins University in 1932, while working in menial jobs to earn money for tuition. When her father's sudden death left her without the money funds necessary to continue on to a doctorate, Carson found a job with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, later known as the Fish and Wildlife Service. While there, she began writing and published articles in newspapers and magazines. The first books that carried her name were written on the topic of sea life biology. With their success, she was able to quit her job and focus on writing full time, and her interests began to shift more toward conservation. She began work on *Silent Spring*, her most lasting legacy. In 1958, gathering research and soliciting contributions from major experts. The process of writing the book was slowed by family issues, and then by sickness when Carson was diagnosed with breast cancer. She died of a heart attack two years after its publication, in 1962.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Carson's decision to report on the dangers of pesticides was a result of a few antineoplastic programs in 1917 in which DDT insecticide with fuel oil was sprayed on private and public land in Long Island. After its publication, *Silent Spring* inspired a grassroots political movement that led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and a ban on DDT in 1972.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Silent Spring* is part of a tradition of nature writing that has its American roots in writers like Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden*, and early figure in the transcendentalist movement, and John Muir, whose popular written accounts of the American West and public campaigning were instrumental in the founding of America's National Park Service. Her conservationist ideas were prefigured by contemporaries like Aldo Leopold (*A Sand County Almanac*, 1949), whose work brought public attention to the values of environmentalism.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Silent Spring*

- **When Written:** 1958-1962
- **Where Written:** Silver Spring, Maryland
- **When Published:** 1962
- **Genre:** Environmental Science, Nonfiction
- **Setting:** United States
- **Antagonist:** Concern about pesticide spraying
- **Point of View:** Carson narrates in the first person.

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Influencing Al Gore.** Al Gore, former vice president and model spokesperson for public awareness of climate change, cites Rachel Carson's book as one of the most important reasons that he became involved with environmental interests.

**Unseen Love.** Carson's first job as a copywriter with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries was writing for a short weekly radio broadcast entitled "Romance Under the Waters."



## PLOT SUMMARY

In *Silent Spring*, a book that is often viewed as a landmark work of environmental writing, Rachel Carson turns her attention to the potentially harmful effects of pesticides on the environment – particularly those pesticides, including DDT, that were being administered via aerial spraying in an attempt to control insect populations on a massive scale. In many ways, *Silent Spring* served as a public warning, gathering expert opinion on the dangers of this increasingly destructive practice. In addition to the actual accounts of contamination that she describes, Carson's book also contains an overarching argument about the proper relationship between man and nature that contributed to the growth of the "deep ecology" movement regarding the interconnectedness of all living things and systems. After a preamble that begins the book by envisioning a future in which **silence** reigns over the world after pesticides have wrought their ultimate destruction on the environment, Carson lays out her basic thesis. In an interconnected world, she argues, man's remedial power to change his environment needs to be wielded with extreme caution. For are to avoid destroying the very systems that sustain us.

To begin her project of public education, Carson outlines the major families of pesticides in use, referring to them as "biocides" once their effects are actually not specific to insects. Having laid out her basic conceptual framework and identified the chemicals in question, Carson breaks down the effects of

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