

WRITERS, SCIENTISTS, AND ACTIVISTS
CELEBRATE THE LIFE AND WRITING OF
RACHEL CARSON



COURAGE



EARTH

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
PETER MATTHIESSEN

Courage *for the* Earth

*Writers, Scientists, and Activists
Celebrate the Life and Writing
of* RACHEL CARSON

Edited by Peter Matthiessen



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Courage for the Earth

PETER MATTHIESSEN

Introduction



SHE WAS ALWAYS a writer and she always knew that. Like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and other American contemporaries with the same affliction, ten-year-old Rachel Louise Carson, born in 1907 in the Allegheny Valley in Springdale, Pennsylvania, was first published in the *St. Nicholas* literary magazine for children. A loner and a reader and a devotee of birds and indeed all nature, the slim, shy girl of plain face and dark curly hair continued writing throughout adolescence: she chose an English major at Pennsylvania College for Women and continued to submit poetry to periodicals. Not until her junior year, when a biology course reawakened the “sense of wonder” with which she had always encountered the natural world, did she switch her major to zoology, still unaware that these passions might be complementary.

Graduating magna cum laude in 1929, Carson went on

to Johns Hopkins to complete her master's degree in zoology, but increasing family responsibilities caused her to abandon her quest for a doctorate. For a few years she would teach zoology at the University of Maryland, continuing her studies in the summer at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. It was there, in her early twenties, that she first fell under the spell of the eternal mysteries of the sea.

In 1932, "Ray" Carson, as some friends knew her, took part-time work as a writer-editor for the old Bureau of Fisheries, a job that led, in 1936, to a full-time appointment as a junior aquatic biologist. To eke out her small salary, she contributed feature articles to the *Baltimore Sun*, most of them related to marine fisheries and the sea. Though her poetry was never to be published, a strong lyrical prose was already evolving, and one of her pieces for a government publication seemed to the editor so elegant and unusual that he urged her to submit it to the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Thus . . . the parts of the plan fall into place: the water receiving from earth and air the simple materials, storing them until the gathering energy of the spring sun wakens the sleeping plants to a burst of dynamic activity, hungry swarms of planktonic animals growing and multiplying upon the abundant plants, and themselves falling prey to the shoals of fish; all, in the end, to be redissolved into their component substances . . . Individual elements are lost to view, only to reappear again and again in different incarnations in a kind of material immortality.

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“Undersea,” the young writer’s first publication in a national magazine (September 1937), was seminal in theme and tone to all her later writing. Together with an evocative *Sun* feature, “Chesapeake Eels Seek the Sargasso Sea” (“From every river and stream along the whole Atlantic Coast, eels are hurrying to the sea . . .”), it was the starting point for her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind*. Though its feeling was near-mystical — the ever-changing changelessness of life on earth — the book’s method took after *Salar the Salmon* and *Taka the Otter*, two popular tales by the British writer Henry Williamson. (Carson’s other revered Henrys were Thoreau, Beston (*The Outermost House*), and Tomlinson, the literary editor of the *Nation and Athenaeum*, whose vacation chronicle, *The Sea and the Jungle*, described a voyage from England to South America, then up the Amazon; *The Sea and the Jungle* may well be the finest writing on the sea, Conrad included.) Like Williamson, Carson used anthropomorphic characters to carry the narrative, notably Scomber the Mackerel (from *Scomber scombrus*, the Atlantic mackerel’s taxonomic name).

He came into being as a tiny globule no larger than a poppy seed, drifting in the surface layers of pale-green water. The globule carried an amber droplet of oil that served to keep it afloat and it carried also a gray particle of living matter so small that it could have been picked up on the point of a needle. In time this particle was to become Scomber, the mackerel, a powerful fish, streamlined after the manner of his kind, and a rover of the seas.

However, the real protagonist of this work (as of its better known successors) was the sea itself — “whether I wished it or not,” as Carson explained in her original foreword, “for the sense of the sea, holding the power of life and death over every one of its creatures from the smallest to the largest, would inevitably pervade every page.”

To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shorebirds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be. These things were before man ever stood on the shore of the ocean and looked out upon it with wonder; they continue year in, year out, throughout the centuries and ages, while man’s kingdoms rise and fall.

Under the Sea-Wind was to remain Carson’s favorite among her books. Published in 1941, on the eve of World War II, it sold less than two thousand copies and passed almost unnoticed. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Fisheries had joined in 1940 with the old Biological Survey to become the Fish and Wildlife Service, and her editorial duties had increased, together with her biological assignments; she was specializing now in marine zoology and was later promoted to chief editor of publications.

Although gentle with contributors, Carson the editor (according to her colleagues) could be “tart and wry” about lackluster writing. Toward her own work, she was ever

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more rigorous and demanding, not only in regard to the depth and breadth of her research but in the economy and clarity of her style, which she revised, read aloud, and tightened with the glad exhilaration of the born writer.

Colleagues enjoyed working with her because of her uncommon competence and dedication but also because of her childlike enthusiasm and undiminished wonder at the myriad ways of nature, which made a scientific expedition out of the simplest foray into field or tide pool. In their first meeting, the naturalist Louis Halle (*Springtime in Washington*) found Carson "quiet, diffident, neat, proper, and without affectation — serious, dignified, with a gentle voice." Nothing written about her since seems to dispute this. But for all her modesty and restraint, she had confidence in her own literary worth and was neither prim nor meek; she had a mischievous streak and an edge to her tongue, and once she was published, became an astute businesswoman and career tactician.

A decade after Carson's first book, her agent, Marie Rodell, circulated a second work in progress that proposed to explore the origins and geological aspects of the sea. Already the author was corresponding with marine scientists everywhere and had even embarked on a Woods Hole research vessel for a sea voyage — her first and last — to the Georges Banks. Because her first book was unsuccessful and its author little known, the new one was widely rejected, despite strong endorsements and support from such influential eminences as the great Woods Hole oceanographer Dr. Henry Bigelow, Dr. Robert C. Murphy of the

American Museum of Natural History, Dr. William Beebe of the New York Zoological Society, Thor Heyerdahl of Kon-tiki, and the best-selling naturalist-writer Edwin Way Teale. The material was refused by fifteen magazines, including *National Geographic*. In September 1950, however, a section titled "The Birth of an Island" appeared in the *Yale Review*; another section was subsequently accepted by *Science Digest*. Eventually the material came into the hands of Edith Oliver at *The New Yorker*, who recommended it to William Shawn, who recognized its exceptional quality at once. Much of it was serialized as "A Profile of the Sea," and in July of the following year, the whole manuscript was published as *The Sea Around Us*. It won the John Burroughs Medal, then the National Book Award, and within the year sold more than 200,000 copies in hardcover. (*Under the Sea-Wind*, resurrected, was to join it for a prolonged stay on the bestseller list.)

What came across in all of Carson's work was what Alfred Schweitzer called "a reverence for life." Accused of "ignoring God" in *The Sea Around Us*, she responded, "As far as I am concerned, there is absolutely no conflict between a belief in evolution and a belief in God as the creator. Believing as I do in evolution, I merely believe that is the method by which God created, and is still creating, life on earth. And it is a method so marvelously conceived that to study it in detail is to increase — and certainly never to diminish — one's reverence and awe both for the Creator and the process."

Although the sea was her obsession, Carson wrote beau-

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tifully on other subjects, from the threat of nuclear technology and the first signs of global warming to animal rights and the importance of introducing nature to young children. She was always interested in the writing process, understanding that “the writer must never try to impose himself upon his subject. He must not try to mold it according to what he believes his readers or editors want to read. His initial task is to come to know his subject intimately, to understand its every aspect, to let it fill his mind. Then at some turning point the subject takes command and the true act of creation begins.” In combining her writing with a career in science, she had what she once called “the magic combination of factual knowledge and deeply felt emotional response.”

In accepting the National Book Award in 1952, with cowinners James Jones and Marianne Moore, she said, “There is no such thing as a separate literature of science, since the aim of science is to discover and illuminate the truth, which is also the aim of all true literature.” As Paul Brooks, her friend and editor at Houghton Mifflin, comments in *Rachel Carson: The Writer at Work*, “As a writer she used words to reveal the poetry — which is to say the essential truth and meaning — at the core of any scientific fact. She sought the knowledge that is essential to appreciate the extent of the unknown.”

Success permitted Carson to retire from the FWS in 1952 and write full-time. The following summer she bought land and built a cottage on the Sheepscot River near West

Southport on the coast of Maine, where she and her mother had visited since 1946. Maria Carson, a kindred spirit in her nature study, had been subtly possessive of her gentle daughter, whom she encouraged to support several family members in addition to herself. Her mother, who died in 1958, is generally accounted responsible for the fact that Carson never married and had children, although she would adopt her sister's orphaned son. In an article of this period called "Help Your Child to Wonder," Carson expressed her intense belief in the importance of nature study for the young.

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood . . . The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused — a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love — then we wish for knowledge . . . Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.

During her Maine summers Carson was active in local conservation efforts and engaged, as she did everywhere, in the close examination of nature, from rocks to insects to marine flora. Nothing was lost on her.

[The firefly] was flying so low over the water that his light cast a long surface reflection, like a little headlight. Then

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the truth dawned on me. He “thought” the flashes in the water [the phosphorescence of sparkling diatoms thrown up by small breaking waves] were other fireflies, signalling to him in the age-old manner of fireflies. Sure enough, he was soon in trouble and we saw his light flashing urgently as he was rolled around in the wet sand. (*From a letter to Dorothy and Stanley Freeman, 1956*)

By now, *The New Yorker* had serialized *The Edge of the Sea*, the third volume of her marine trilogy, which evoked the ecology of maritime communities on three types of coast — the rock-bound shores north of Cape Cod, ruled by the tides; the sand beaches to the south of it, ruled by the waves; and the coral reefs of southern Florida, whose ecology is mainly determined by the ocean currents. This book, which was also a bestseller, was followed in March of the following year by a Carson-scripted television film on clouds called *Something About the Sky*.

Carson’s new celebrity had given her the confidence and opportunity to speak out strongly for the environmental cause. In an op-ed letter to the *Washington Post* condemning the ouster by the new Republican administration of a competent and principled secretary of the interior, Albert M. Day, in favor of the crass, partisan political appointee Benton McKay, she found the cool and furious tone that would serve her well in *Silent Spring* a few years later.

For many years public-spirited citizens throughout the country have been working for the conservation of natural resources, realizing their vital importance to the Nation.

Apparently their hard-won progress is to be wiped out, as a politically-minded Administration returns us to the dark ages of unrestrained exploitation and destruction. It is one of the ironies of our time that, while concentrating on the defense of our country against enemies from without, we should be so heedless of those who would destroy it from within.

She could have signed that identical letter today.

As early as 1945, Carson and her close colleague Dr. Clarence Cottam had become alarmed by government abuse of new chemical insecticides such as DDT. Most of these highly toxic materials had been derived from lethal compounds developed originally for use in war; the "predator" and "pest" control programs, in particular, which were broadcasting poisons with little regard for the welfare of other creatures. That same year, she offered an article to *Reader's Digest* on insecticide experiments going on in nearby Patuxent, Maryland, not far from her home in Silver Spring, to determine the effects of DDT on valuable insects as well as on birds and other life. The *Digest* was not interested, though *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* had published articles by others that same year that warned of the dangers of DDT to the balance of nature. Carson went back to her government job and her sea trilogy, and not until after the third volume had been completed did she return to this earlier preoccupation.

By that time, the insecticide barrage had been augmented by dieldrin, parathion, heptachlor, malathion, and other fearful compounds many times stronger than DDT,

all of which the government planned to distribute through the Department of Agriculture for public use and commercial manufacture. "The more I learned about the use of pesticides, the more appalled I became," Carson recalled. "I realized that here was the material for a book. What I discovered was that everything which meant most to me as a naturalist was being threatened, and that nothing I could do would be more important." She intended to make certain that if the public continued to let itself be led by politicians who stood by and permitted the looting of world resources and the pollution of the land, air, and water that our children must inherit, it would not be because we knew no better.

With her fame, eloquence, and reputation for precision, Carson could count on the support of the leading scientists and conservation organizations and was well positioned to command a hearing. Even so, the *Digest* and other magazines had little interest in her gloomy subject. Then, in 1957, came a startling wildlife mortality in the wake of a mosquito control campaign near Duxbury, Massachusetts, followed by a pointless spraying of a DDT/fuel-oil mix over eastern Long Island for eradication of the gypsy moth. Next, an all-out war in the Southern states against the fire ant did such widespread damage that its own beneficiaries cried out for mercy, and after that a great furor arose over the spraying of cranberry plants with aminotriazol, which led to a Department of Agriculture ban against all cranberry marketing, just in time for Thanksgiving 1959.

"During the past 15 years," Carson protested in a letter

that year to the *Washington Post*, “the use of highly poisonous hydrocarbons and organophosphates allied to the nerve gases of chemical warfare built up from small beginnings to what a noted British ecologist recently called ‘an amazing rain of death upon the surface of the earth.’ Most of these chemicals have long-persisting residues on vegetation, in soils, and even in the bodies of earthworms and other organisms . . . If this ‘rain of death’ has produced such a disastrous effect on birds, what of other lives, including our own?”

Earlier that year, the ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson, alarmed by the falloff in bird numbers, had declared that the current broadcasting of lethal chemicals was the greatest threat to wildlife of all time. DDT had been classified as a “chemical carcinogen” by one of Carson’s informants, Dr. Wilhelm Hueper of the National Cancer Institute (who found Carson “a sincere, unusually well-informed scientist possessing not only an unusual degree of social responsibility but also having the courage and ability to express and fight for her convictions and principles”). She was fighting more desperately than he knew. In 1960, Rachel Carson had learned that her doctors had misdiagnosed what turned out to be a fatal breast cancer. Despite a mastectomy and debilitating illness, she would persevere in the most demanding book she had ever written.

As a new writer in this period, I was reading all her books with the greatest admiration as fast as they appeared. By ill luck, I never met Carson, although I worked with some of her FWS colleagues, including Dr. Clarence Cottam and

also Bob Hines, whose superb line drawings illustrated *The Edge of the Sea* and also *Wildlife in America*, my own contribution to the new environmental movement. Though that book and others had already denounced the indiscriminate broadcasting of pesticides by the time *Silent Spring* appeared, it was Carson who hit upon the brilliant metaphor that drew all these warnings to a point:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings . . . Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change . . . There was a strange stillness . . . The few birds seen anywhere were moribund: they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus . . . of scores of bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

That same year, E. B. White had recommended Carson's project to William Shawn at *The New Yorker*. In January 1960, delighted by Shawn's response to her material, she wrote to her friend Dorothy Freeman, "Suddenly the tension of four years was broken and I let the tears come. I think I let you see last summer what my deeper feelings are . . . when I said I could never again listen happily to a thrush song if I had not done all I could. And last night the thoughts of all the birds and other creatures and all the loveliness that is in nature came to me with such a surge of deep happiness that now I had done what I could — I had been able to complete it — now it had its own life."

Silent Spring, serialized in *The New Yorker* in June and July 1962, gored corporate oxen all over the country. Even before publication, Carson was violently assailed by lawsuits and derision, including suggestions that this meticulous scientist (whose master's thesis had been titled "The Development of the Pronephros During the Embryonic and Early Larval Life of the Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*)" was a "hysterical woman" unqualified to write such a subversive book. For *Silent Spring* had dared to say, among many other unconscionable things, "This is an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged." A huge counter-attack was organized and led by Monsanto, Velsicol, American Cyanamid — indeed, the whole chemical industry, duly supported by the Department of Agriculture as well as the domesticated ostriches in the media. (*Time's* reviewer deplored Carson's "over-simplifications and downright errors . . . Many of the scary generalizations — and there are lots of them — are patently unsound.") *Reader's Digest* tagged along with an abridgment of the *Time* review, with which it replaced its own canceled condensation of the original. (Seven years later, in April 1969, *Time* would feel obliged to run Carson's photo at the head of an environmental article citing new evidence that completely supported the data in *Silent Spring*.)

By year's end, *Audubon* and *National Parks* magazine had published additional excerpts from the book, and all but the most self-serving of Carson's attackers were backing

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rapidly toward safer ground. In their ugly campaign to reduce a brave scientist's protest to a matter of public relations, the chemical interests had only increased public awareness. *Silent Spring* became a runaway bestseller, with international reverberations. In the next two years, in what the author herself called "an extraordinary constellation of events," Carson was awarded the Audubon Medal and numerous honors, including election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in homage to her rare literary gifts. Nearly fifty years later, the book is still regarded as the cornerstone of the new environmentalism movement. Well crafted, fearless, and succinct, it remains her most celebrated book, although her wonderful essays on the world around us may be remembered longer.

Though she worked in nonfiction, Rachel Carson understood the task of all good writing as a work of creation: "The writer moves into a realm where he had never been before — perhaps where no one has ever been. It is a lonely place, and even a little frightening." Famed as a scientist whose timely book on chemical poisons had served as a warning to the world about the insatiable nature of corporate greed, she was at the same time an important writer, one of the finest nature writers of her century. And it is for her literary excellence, not her cry of warning, that in the end, she may be best remembered.

Off the shore from her Maine cottage is an island forested in spruce, which Carson invested with many lovely reveries.

The island voice which came . . . most beautifully and clearly each evening was the voice of a forest spirit, the hermit thrush. At the hour of the evening's beginning its broken and silvery cadences drifted with infinite deliberation across the water. Its phrases were filled with a beauty and a meaning that were not wholly of the present, as though the thrush were singing of other sunsets, extending far back beyond his personal memory, through eons of time when his forebears had known this place, and from spruce trees long since returned to earth had sung the beauty of the evening.

Perhaps the imminence of her own mortality had helped her find her precious balance and perspective. In most photographs, the pensive face appears a little sad, but this was true long before she knew that she had cancer. And surely a lingering sadness is unavoidable for all who revere the natural world and bear witness to its ongoing degradation, as the rightful heritage of our children and grandchildren diminishes day by day. "Of course I felt special sympathy with your thoughts on 'the secret tension between love [of nature] and despair' so that 'no carefree love of the planet is now possible.' Each day those words become more true!" she wrote to her friend Lois Crisler, author of *Arctic Wild*. Carson died at the age of fifty-six, in April 1964, in Maryland.

Sometimes I would watch the island from the hill that sloped up from the water line . . . The woods . . . were bright with the moving, flitting forms of many warblers — the exquisite powder-blue parula with his breast band

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of orange and magenta; the Blackburnian, like flickering flames in the spruces; the myrtle, flashing his yellow rump patch. But most numerous of all was the trim little black-throated green warbler, whose dreamy, nostalgic song drifted all day long through the woods, little wisps of song lingering like bits of fog in the tree tops. (*unpublished essay*)

“The beauty of the living world I was trying to save,” she wrote in a letter to a friend in 1962, “has always been uppermost in my mind — that, and anger at the senseless, brutish things that were being done. I have felt bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could — if I didn’t at least try I could never be happy again in nature. But now I can believe that I have at least helped a little. It would be unrealistic to believe one book could bring a complete change.”

Sadly, the damage to wildlife being done by poison chemicals today is far worse than it was when she wrote her book. When *Silent Spring* was published, I could still count sixteen species of wood warblers in May migration on my own small property on the northeast Atlantic coast, and several species of shy woodland thrushes appeared regularly in spring and fall. In recent years, I have seen fewer than sixteen warblers of *all* species during spring migration, and a few hermit thrushes only. While this “silent spring” is not entirely attributable to pesticides, one shudders to imagine nonetheless how much more impoverished our habitat would be had Rachel Carson not sounded the alarm.

Rachel Carson was not a born crusader but an intelli-

gent and dedicated woman who rose heroically to the occasion. Rightly confident about her facts as well as her ability to present them, secure in the approval of her peers, she remained serene in the face of her accusers. Throughout her life, she was brave and fierce in defense of what she held most sacred, which was the wonder of life and all its creatures, even such malignant creatures as ourselves.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The "courage" in the title of this fine variegated collection is rightly celebrated in virtually every essay in this book, including my own introduction, and this dedicated bravery of Rachel Carson, born of a quiet self-assurance, can scarcely be overpraised. Her tenacity withstood the subversion, slander, and mendacity of our greedy industries and corporations and their errand boys in Congress and the media—forces that for long decades, doing great harm to their own country and the citizen-consumers who have made them so wealthy, have defeated any lasting progress against the pollution of our environment by chemical wastes and inefficient, filthy, and toxic fossil fuels.

As a dying woman all too aware that her time was running out even as she struggled to finish *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson also left us prescient warnings — largely subverted or ignored — about the sickening of oceans and the contamination of the earth's climate, already manifesting the first symptoms of what all but hired scientists have come to recognize as global warming.

Again, I agree with more than one of the excellent essayists in this volume that in years to come, a time-bound tract such as *Silent Spring*, for all its eloquence and deserved renown, may not be esteemed quite so highly as the beautiful writings and responses that record Rachel Carson's thoughts and observations in the field of the life of seas and songbirds. In her lyrical intuitions and extraordinary ear for the precision and balance of well-fashioned English sentences, her work transcends most so-called nature writing, earning a place as real literature beyond all genres that will endure to inspire those who follow. Rachel Carson is still insufficiently recognized for what she is and always will be, an American writer who escapes her several categories to endow us with some of the finest prose in the English language. — P.M.

L I N D A L E A R

Love, Fear, and Witnessing



WHEN I WROTE *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* in 1997, my hope was to dismiss for all time the notion of Carson as an iconic goddess who fearlessly battled the giants of science and industry for the rights of nature. I wanted to replace this stubborn idea with a real woman, one whose life and work were shaped by the collapse of certainty and the possibility of annihilation.

Carson certainly was fearless. Her courage helped change the way we now look at the natural world. But she was also deeply driven, and often emotionally remote to others. She was a woman who knew in her inner core that she had an “obligation to endure” and that there was work for her to do; but the doing was as full of pain and pathos as it was of wonder and warning. I hoped to make clear these fully human aspects of Carson’s life and thereby to open it to examination and elaboration. Carson was aware from a

FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY CRITICAL TIMES, COURAGE FOR THE EARTH IS A CENTENNIAL APPRECIATION OF RACHEL CARSON'S BRAVE LIFE AND TRANSFORMATIVE WRITING

Rachel Carson's lyrical, popular books about the sea, including her best-selling *The Sea Around Us*, "set a standard for nature writing for all time to come" (Roger Caras). By the late 1950s, Carson was the most respected science writer in America.

She completed *Silent Spring* (1962) against formidable personal odds, and with it shaped a powerful social movement that has altered the course of history. In *Silent Spring* Carson asserted that "the right of the citizen to be secure in his own home against the intrusion of poisons applied by other persons" must surely be a basic human right. She was the first to challenge the moral vacuity of a government that refused to take responsibility for, or even to acknowledge evidence of, environmental damage.

In this volume, today's foremost scientists and writers give compelling evidence that Carson's transformative insights — her courage for the earth — are giving a new generation of activists the inspiration they need to move consumers, industry, and government to action.

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