

GREEN GIANTS (HEROES OF THE ENVIRONMENT)

RACHEL CARSON:

SOUNDING THE ALARM ON POLLUTION

Rachel Carson was a small, soft-spoken scientist.

She also was one of the towering Green Giants of the 20th century.

Her Book Changed Our World

Her 1962 book, "Silent Spring," was probably the most influential work on conservation ever written. It made Americans think hard about pollution of the environment. It led to strict controls on synthetic pesticides.

Rachel Carson was a marine biologist. She already had published three excellent books about the sea and its creatures. All were best sellers. They combined sound science with good writing.

Deadly Chemicals

The purpose of "Silent Spring" was to raise public alarm about chemical pesticides, especially one called DDT, which was introduced in 1939.

In the 1940's, the chemical industry developed many related pesticides. The pesticides saved farmers and gardeners time and money because they made it easier to control insects and weeds. By the mid-1950's, half a billion pounds of pesticides were being spread over fields and gardens each year.

The trouble was that some chemicals hurt not only insects and weeds but also birds, mammals and fish. Some scientists said the chemicals hurt people too. Others had written about the danger before Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring," but few people paid attention.

Thousands of Dead Fish

By 1960, though, the evidence was clear. Fish had died by the tens of thousands when orchards near lakes were sprayed with pesticides. Thousands of birds had been doomed by aerial spraying of woodlands.

Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" fairly shouted: "Whoa! Look what we're doing!" She did not oppose the use of all pesticides. But she wrote, "We have allowed these chemicals to

**Eighth
in a Series**

Carson at a Glance

BORN:
May 27, 1907, at
Springdale, Pa.;
died April 14, 1964.

**LEGACY FOR
THE EARTH:**
She put a spotlight
on environmental
pollution.

**FOR FURTHER
READING:**
"Sea and Earth: The
Life of Rachel
Carson,"
by Philip Sterling;
"Rachel Carson,"
by Carol B. Gartner.



"Future historians may well be amazed by our distorted sense of proportion. How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind? Yet this is what we have done." —Rachel Carson's warning in "Silent Spring."



be used with little or no advance investigation of their effect on soil, water, wildlife, and man himself."

Parts of the book began appearing in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1962. Rachel's message made for a noisy summer. It was attacked by the chemical industry, food companies, and some government agencies. They said the book was scientifically unsound. They dismissed her as a "nature nut," "food fadist," and "just a bird watcher."

Mild-Mannered but Tough

Rachel was quiet and mild-mannered, but she was also tough-minded. She stood up to all the criticism and enjoyed the praise that came from many scientists who knew about pesticides.

In following years, DDT and 11 other chemical pesticides Rachel had warned about were banned or tightly restricted. By the time of her death in 1964, her name was a household word.

A Writer at Age 10

Rachel Carson had come a long way from her childhood in a small town near Pittsburgh, Pa.

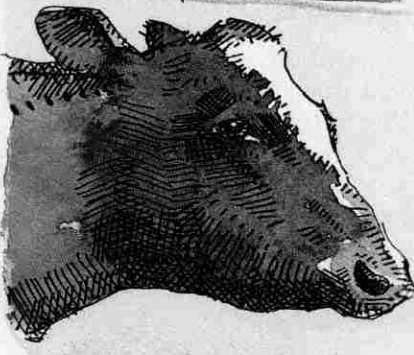
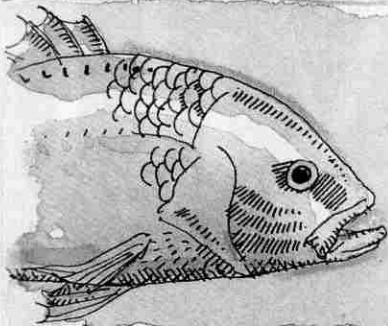
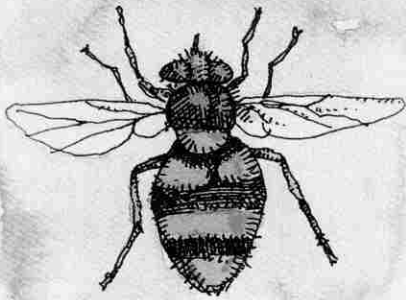
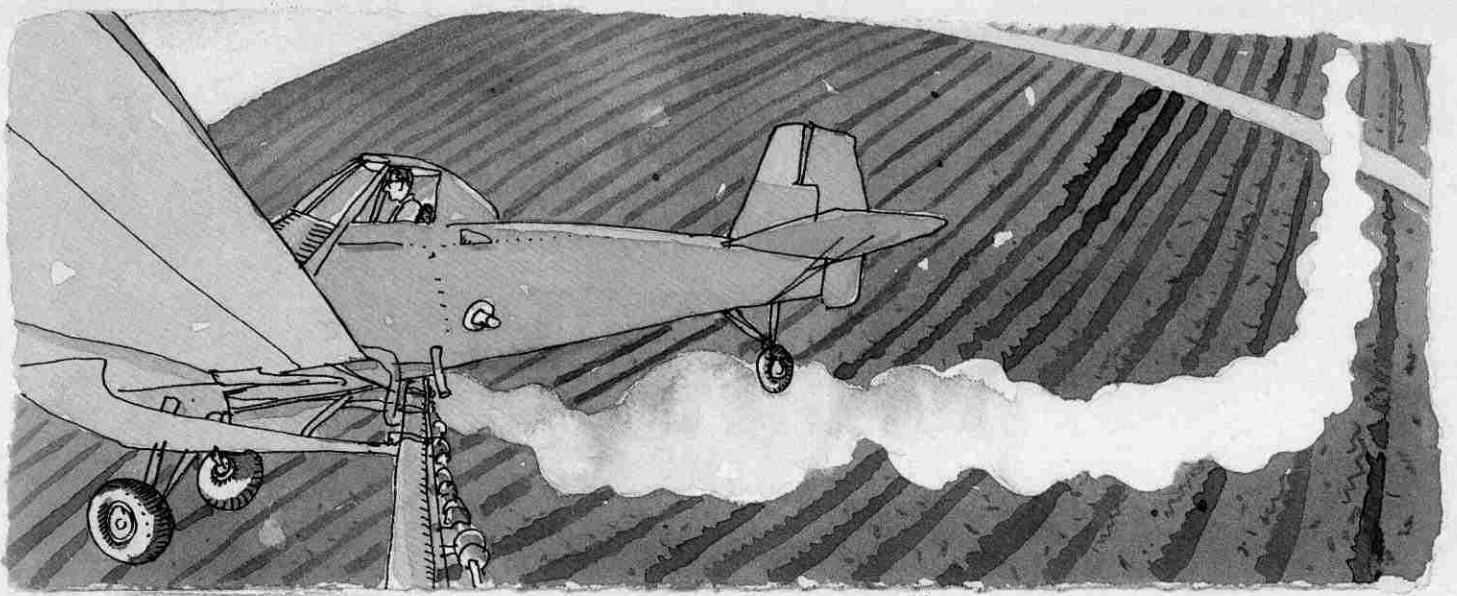
She had learned to love nature as a young girl. Her mother could not bear to kill a living thing, and so Rachel had to catch insects that got into the house and release them outside.

Rachel's first published story appeared in *St. Nicholas*, a children's magazine, when she was only 10 years old. She decided to become a writer, but in college she had to take a science course. She chose biology—and liked it. That was the start of a career that joined science with literature.

By the time she had published her third best seller on the sea, Rachel Carson was famous. People were ready to listen to her scary message in "Silent Spring." It changed how they thought about the earth—and also how they treated it.★

—Robert W. Peterson

Illustration by Joe Ciardello



Rachel Carson

Cardiello '94

