

Silent Spring: Rachel Carson [B2]

Pietra miliare dell' ecologismo, questo audace saggio sconvolse la società dell'epoca mettendo in discussione la fiducia dell'umanità nel progresso tecnologico.

Few books have been powerful enough to change the course of history, but Rachel Carson's Silent Spring is [one such book](#). Its impact on the popular imagination was such that it changed US public policy and led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1907 in Pennsylvania, biologist Rachel Louise Carson read [widely](#) from childhood and had a passion for writing, until an enthusiastic zoology professor encouraged her to study science. On graduating, she worked for the US Bureau of [Fisheries](#), preparing [radio broadcasts](#) and writing articles on natural history. [Soon enough](#), Carson was promoted to the position of [chief editor](#) for all US Fish and Wildlife Service publications. In 1952 she published The Sea Around Us, a biography of the sea all the way back to its [primeval](#) beginnings.

ROMANTIC POETRY

The title Silent Spring came from a [line](#) in a John Keats poem that evoked a ruined landscape where birdsong is absent. Carson's book centres on a US federal programme in 1957 to eradicate the invasive [gypsy moth](#). To do so, pesticides mixed with fuel oil were [sprayed](#) from agricultural aircraft. They included a powerful insecticide called dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane, or DDT. DDT was big [business hailed](#) as perfectly safe, it was used [widely](#) during World War Two to control malaria, typhus, [body lice](#) and [bubonic plague](#).

DEADLY ENCOUNTER

Carson, however, was deeply concerned about the use of synthetic pesticides. She came in contact with a community of scientists who were documenting their detrimental physiological and environmental effects. Silent Spring was the result of this four-year research project. Its meticulous research and shocking revelations are delivered in clear, beautiful prose. It begins in the style of a children's story. "There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields." "C'era una volta una città nel cuore dell'America dove tutta la vita sembrava scorrere in armonia con il paesaggio circostante. La città si stendeva al centro d'una scacchiera di operose fattorie, tra campi di grano e colline coltivate a frutteto dove, di primavera, le bianche nuvole dei rami in fiore spiccavano sul verde dei prati."

FACTS AND FIGURES

Carson draws her reader into a fascinating yet horrific tale, supporting her claims with empirical evidence and eyewitness accounts. She describes how pesticides do not merely destroy insects, but everything associated with them. "[T]here is a problem of ecology, of interrelationships, of interdependence. We poison the caddis fly in a stream and the salmon runs dwindle and die. We poison the gnats in a lake, and the poison travels from link to link of the food chain, and soon the birds of the lake margin become its victims. We spray our elms and the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we attacked the robins directly but because the poison travelled, step by step, through the now familiar elm leaf-earthworm-robin cycle." "[...] il problema resta sempre uno: un problema di ecologia, di correlazione e di interdipendenza. Avveleniamo le larve dei Tricotteri che galleggiano sull'acqua d'una corrente ed i salmoni diminuiscono e muoiono; avveleniamo le zanzare di un lago ed il tossico, passando da un anello all'altro della catena alimentare, contamina alla fine gli uccelli che vivono sulle sue sponde. Irroriamo i nostri olmi e, la primavera seguente, più nessun pettirosso canterà tra le fronde, e non perché l'insetticida abbia

intossicato direttamente gli uccelli, ma perché si è trasmesso, passo passo, attraverso l'ormai noto ciclo foglie-lombrico-pettiroso.”

DESPAIR AND HOPE

As part of her research, Carson discovered pesticides were carcinogenic. However, in March 1960, she herself became ill with breast cancer. Worried that this would be used against her by the chemical industry to undermine her book, she concealed her illness. On publishing her book, however, Carson still had to counteract claims that her research was unscientific. She reacted with composure and confidence, and gained powerful support. In 1963, Silent Spring moved President John F. Kennedy to summon a Congressional hearing to investigate the use of pesticides. Carson's research was taken seriously and the first federal policies were introduced to protect the planet.

RELEVANCE TODAY

Carson's book is as relevant today as it was when it was first published. It is still taught in universities and cited by environmental groups. However, while DDT was banned worldwide for agricultural use in 2001, a new range of stealthy and dangerous chemicals have replaced it, including microplastics and PFAS or 'forever chemicals'. Behind them are powerful corporate interests who seek to play down their importance. Carson's eloquent questioning of humanities' priorities remains spine-chilling today. "Have we fallen into a mesmerized state that makes us accept as inevitable that which is inferior or detrimental, as though having lost the will or the vision to demand that which is good?" "Siamo dunque caduti in uno stato di ipnosi tale da farci accettare come inevitabile ciò che è deteriore e nefasto, quasi che avessimo perduto la volontà o la preveggenza di tendere a ciò che è bene?" "ir lo bueno?".

PROFOUND IMPACT

Weakened by her cancer and its treatment, Carson died of a heart attack in April 1964. She did not live long enough to see the profound impact her book would make on the environmental movement, and it still inspires activists and politicians.

Glossary

- **carcinogenic** = cancerogeno
- **hearing** = udienza
- **Weakened** = indebolire
- **radio broadcasts** = trasmissioni radiofoniche
- **primeval** = primordiali
- **range** = gamma
- **spine-chilling** = agghiacciante, da brivido
- **one such book** = uno di quei libri
- **gypsy moth** = falena
- **bubonic plague** = peste bubbonica
- **claims** = affermazioni
- **concealed** = nascondere
- **sprayed** = spruzzare
- **hailed** = considerare
- **draws** = attrarre
- **to undermine** = sminuire
- **stealthy** = silenziosi
- **PFAS** = sostanze perfluoroalchiliche (acronimo di per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances)
- **moved** = spingere
- **widely** = ampiamente
- **Fisheries** = pesca
- **line** = verso
- **business** = grande affare, redditizio
- **banned** = vietare
- **to play down** = minimizzare
- **Soon enough** = abbastanza presto
- **chief editor** = direttrice, caporedattrice
- **body lice** = pidocchi
- **eyewitness accounts** = testimonianze oculari