

RACHEL CARSON

The Sea Around Us



AN ILLUSTRATED COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

FOREWORD

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Rachel Carson. Her very name evokes the beatific luminosity of the canonized. Yet Carson was not a saint, but better, a prophet—that rare soul who diverts our attention into the path of the oncoming truth.

Rachel Carson was the best thing America is capable of producing: a modest person, concerned, courageous, and profoundly right—all at the same time. Troubled by knowledge of an emerging threat to the web of life, she took pains to become informed, summoned her courage, breached her confines, and conveyed a diligently constructed message with eloquence enough to catalyze a new social movement. Her life addressed the promise and premise of being truly human.

But we've gotten ahead of the story, because the Rachel Carson who wrote *The Sea Around Us* was not yet the person we think of. *The Sea Around Us* made "Miss Carson" famous in 1951 and was a bestseller ten years before *Silent Spring*. What you feel here is a restrained, intelligent woman's heartfelt desire to share her passion with the wider world. While she was destined to be

just a little ahead of her time, she was also a product of her time, and wrote *The Sea Around Us* within the boundaries of a culture yet to be transformed by the women's movement, civil rights movement, sexual revolution, peace movement—or the environmental movement that she herself ignited. Here we feel Carson working hard, honing her command of scientific material and language; you sense her power building like a rising groundswell from a distant storm, but here it is still a steady swell, not yet an unstoppable rising tide.

The Rachel Carson we think of is the author of *Silent Spring*, birth mother of modern environmentalism, messenger of a story that rocked the world. The real Rachel Carson never met her. She planted not hay, but fruit trees. She survived to see her planting finished, and she watched as the seeds began fitfully to sprout, their roots to take hold. But she never knew their fruits. Because her work's ramifications continued unfolding in the decade and a half between her death and the full flowering of the environmental movement, she didn't live long enough to become acquainted with the Carson we know, that towering figure whose light illumined our sense of the world forever, who showed us how interconnected are our actions and all of life on Earth.

Why do we still seek out Carson's half-century-old work? Not, I think, for facts—facts abound—but rather, for clues. In her meticulous prose we sense her effort and the fine line she walked. We sense a woman held to the fringes of the science she eventually waded so deeply into, ultimately risking professional reputation and paying personal cost to serve a larger truth. We also read her to reconnect with a sense of innocence. But we see her developing understanding leading to innocence lost. She felt called to tip us all out of that innocence; yet her earlier works help us revisit the beginning, before the apple was bitten. And we read her for the reassurance of making contact with a woman of such substance and courage. Carson's lasting power is that we still seek orientation by her moral compass. She remains a spiritual leader, capable of conveying a sense of direction toward how we ought poise ourselves in the world. Of all the things she labored to do, her most unintended accomplishment was to inspire us with an example of how we as individuals can strive to live. We read Rachel Carson now because we cannot write her to say, Thank You. Because we hunger for a spirit like hers. We read Rachel Carson now, because we miss her.