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RACHEL CARSON

Before there was an environmental movement, there was one brave woman and her very brave book

She was always a writer, and she always knew that. Like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, e.e. cummings, Millay and E.B. White, 10-year-old Rachel Louise Carson, born in 1907 in the Allegheny Valley town of Springdale, Pa., was first published in the St. Nicholas literary magazine for children. A reader and loner and devotee of birds, and indeed all nature, the slim, shy girl of plain face and dark curly hair continued writing throughout adolescence, chose an English major at Pennsylvania College for Women and continued to submit poetry to periodicals. Not until 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, not yet aware that her literary and scientific passions might be complementary.

Graduating magna cum laude in 1929, Carson won her master's degree in zoology at Johns Hopkins, 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 Laboratories in Woods Hole, Mass. It was there, in her early 20s, that she first saw--and became enchanted with--the enormous mysteries of the sea.

In 1935 "Ray" Carson, as some friends knew her, took part-time work writing science radio scripts 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 income, she contributed feature articles to the Baltimore Sun, most of them related to marine zoology. 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.

"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..."), it was the starting point for her first book.

Under the Sea-Wind (1941), Carson's favorite among her books, would pass almost unnoticed. Meanwhile, her editorial duties in what would become the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) had increased. In 1946 she was promoted to information specialist, and in 1949 became chief editor of publications.

In their first meeting, the naturalist Louis Halle found Carson "quiet, diffident, neat, proper and without affectation." Nothing written about her since seems to dispute this. But for all her modesty and restraint, she was not prim. She had a mischievous streak, a tart tongue and confidence in her own literary worth.

A decade after her first book, her agent circulated a second work in progress that proposed to explore the origins and geological aspects of the sea. The material was rejected by 15 magazines, including the Saturday Evening Post and National Geographic. Eventually the work 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 1951 the entire 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 hard cover.

Success permitted Carson to retire from the FWS in 1952 to write full time. That 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.

Her new celebrity also gave her the opportunity to speak out on concerns she felt strongly about. As early as 1945, Carson and her close colleague Clarence Cottam had become alarmed by government abuse of new chemical pesticides such as DDT, in particular the "predator" and "pest" control programs, 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 at Patuxent, Md., not far from her home in Silver Spring, to determine the effects of DDT on all life in affected areas. Apparently the Digest was not interested. 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.

Meanwhile, 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."

With her fame and eloquence and reputation for precision, Carson could count on the support of leading scientists and conservation organizations, and was well positioned to command a hearing. Even so, the Digest and other magazines had little interest in this gloomy subject. Then, in 1957, there was a startling wildlife mortality in the wake of a mosquito-control campaign near Duxbury, Mass., 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 harm to other creatures that its beneficiaries cried for mercy; and after that a great furor arose across the country over the spraying of cranberry plants with aminotriazole, which led to an Agriculture Department ban against all cranberry marketing just in time for Thanksgiving 1959.

Though others had been warning of pesticide dangers, it was Carson who struck upon the metaphor that would draw all these dire 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."

Silent Spring, serialized in the New Yorker in June 1962, gored corporate oxen all over the country. Even before publication, Carson was violently assailed by threats of lawsuits and derision, including suggestions that this meticulous scientist was a "hysterical woman" unqualified to write such a book. A huge counterattack was organized and led by Monsanto, Velsicol, American Cyanamid--indeed, the whole chemical industry--duly supported by the Agriculture Department as well as the more cautious in the media. (TIME's reviewer deplored Carson's "oversimplifications and downright errors...Many of the scary generalizations--and there are lots of them--are patently unsound.")

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 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 best seller, with international reverberations. Nearly 40 years later, it is still regarded as the cornerstone of the new environmentalism. Carson was not a born crusader but an intelligent and dedicated woman who rose heroically to the occasion. She was rightly confident about her facts as well as her ability to present them. Secure in the approval of her peers, she remained remarkably serene in the face of her accusers. Perhaps the imminence of her own mortality had helped her find this 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. She was 56 when she died in April 1964.

"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."

True, the damage being done by poison chemicals today is far worse than it was when she wrote the book. Yet one shudders to imagine how much more impoverished our habitat would be had Silent Spring not sounded the alarm. Well crafted, fearless and succinct, it remains her most celebrated book, although her wonderful essays on the sea may be remembered longer. Even if she had not inspired a generation of activists, Carson would prevail as one of the greatest nature writers in American letters.

Environmentalist Peter Matthiessen's latest novel, Bone by Bone, is due out in April

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BORN May 27, 1907, in Springdale, Pa. 1928 Graduates from Pa. College for Women 1929 Spends first summer in Woods Hole 1932 Receives M.A. from Johns Hopkins University 1936 Takes a job with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries 1951 Publishes The Sea Around Us 1962 Silent Spring stirs national controversy 1964 Dies April 14 in Silver Spring, Md.

"To stand at the edge of the sea...is to have knowledge of things that are as eternal as any earthly life can be." RACHEL CARSON, Under the Sea-Wind

"Man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself." RACHEL CARSON, in a CBS television interview in 1963

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): A SHY, MELANCHOLY EXPRESSION BELIED A POWERFUL WILL

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): CARSON'S WORK AS A MARINE BIOLOGIST PROMPTED HER FIRST MAGAZINE ARTICLE, WHICH LED TO HER LANDMARK BOOK

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): SHE FOCUSED ATTENTION ON THE EFFECTS OF DDT ON BIRDS

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FEWER PESTICIDES MEANT STRONGER EGGS--AND NEW HOPE--FOR THE BALDEAGLE

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By Peter Matthiessen

JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU: LORD OF THE DEPTHS

He was a sailor, explorer, inventor, best-selling author, prizewinning filmmaker, passionate environmentalist and canny businessman. Instantly recognizable by his pipe, red cap and gaunt silhouette, Jacques-Yves Cousteau--a.k.a. "Captain Planet"--was arguably the century's best known, most popular Frenchman. For generations of scuba divers--and millions of armchair explorers--he created a crystal-clear window for the unseen world beneath the waves.

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Before Cousteau, undersea exploration was limited by the length of a human breath or the tether on a diving helmet. His co-invention of the Aqua-Lung in 1943 freed us to roam the ocean depths--like an "archangel" flying through the heavens, as he put it. Maker of more than 150 films, beginning with his Oscar-winning The Silent World in 1956, Cousteau revealed a flotilla of wondrous creatures to an audience that was instantly entranced. In his last book, Man, Octopus and Orchid, published shortly after his death in 1997 at the age of 87, Cousteau summed up his long career with a powerful denunciation of ocean pollution, nuclear energy and overfishing. Though some ecologists lamented his late-blooming commitment to their cause, and professional scientists questioned the credentials of this self-taught oceanographer, their carping paled next to Cousteau's towering lifetime achievements--crowned by his induction into the prestigious French Academy in 1989.

Born near Bordeaux in 1910, Cousteau had dreamed of a career as a French navy aviator until a near fatal automobile crash dashed those hopes--and serendipitously led him to his true vocation. Taking up swimming to strengthen his broken arms, Cousteau fell in love with the sea. "Sometimes we are lucky enough to know that our lives have been changed, to discard the old, embrace the new, and run headlong down an immutable course," he later wrote. "It happened to me on that summer's day when my eyes were opened to the sea."

In 1950 Cousteau acquired a retired 66-ft. minesweeper named Calypso and turned it into the floating oceanographic laboratory on which he would sail the seven seas for more than four decades. That legendary vessel sank after a freak accident in Singapore harbor in 1996; a state-of-the-art 217-ft. replacement, Calypso II, is on the drawing board awaiting funding. But through the Cousteau Society, which he founded in 1973 and which continues to operate under the direction of his widow Francine, Captain Planet's legacy lives on in the form of films, books and a thousand azure images etched indelibly on the mind.

PHOTO (COLOR): THE AQUA-LUNG FREED DIVERS TO EXPLORE THE DEPTHS UNTETHERED

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): HIS FILMS REVEALED AN ENDLESS ARRAY OF RAINBOW-COLORED CREATURES

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By Thomas Sancton/Paris

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