
In 2004 an editorialist for the New York Times Magazine likened the persistent intolerance of the use of DDT maintained by the U.S. public to the much-publicized persistence of DDT in the environment (Rosenberg 2004). The editorial argued that the extreme stigma placed on DDT by Rachel Carson’s book Silent Spring has impeded and at times prevented African countries from using the chemical to control malaria-transmitting mosquitoes, forcing them to rely instead on less effective, more-expensive pesticides and intervention measures. The claim is then made that this intolerant pressure has cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of African children their lives, and that Rachel Carson, because of Silent Spring, is implicated in this tragedy. Silent Spring is thus still an influential, even controversial and perhaps misunderstood, environmental book.

The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson and the Rise of the Environmental Movement is a recent narrative biography that seeks to shed additional light on Rachel Carson as an author and on the role she and her books played in the U.S. environmental movement of the late 20th century. The book’s author, Mark Hamilton Lytle, is Professor of History and Environmental Studies at Bard College. Appropriately, the book’s 2007 publication year marks the 100th anniversary of Carson’s birth. Two biographies of Carson are already available, one by a close friend, published less than a decade after Carson’s death in 1964 (Brooks 1972), and the other, a lengthy, exhaustively researched volume published a decade ago (Lear 1997). A comparatively slender volume, The Gentle Subversive aims to be different in 2 important ways: format and focus. Formatically, this book is a narrative biography, striving to cast the facts and happenings of Carson’s life as a highly readable story, with ample descriptive detail. The focus of The Gentle Subversive is on Carson as a writer. This is welcome because Carson’s legacy is embodied in the books she wrote, particularly Silent Spring. Adding interest to this approach is Carson’s statement that, while it was clear how she developed her interest in nature (through her mother’s close involvement in her education about the natural world as a child), her fondness and proclivity for writing were a mystery (pp. 252–253). Lytle focuses the biography on this mystery, not solving it, but reporting on its development and consequences.

While not surprising, it is ironic that Silent Spring (1962), wherein Carson details man’s insults and injuries to nature through the indiscriminant use of pesticides, has produced her most lasting impact on the world. Silent Spring was not Carson’s most critically acclaimed work, nor did it focus on her true passion: the natural history of wild things, especially marine organisms, in their natural habitats. Given its writerly focus, The Gentle Subversive works its way chronologically through each of Carson’s major writing projects, beginning with several short stories she wrote for an acclaimed children’s magazine as an adolescent. Lytle carefully describes the development of each project idea and Carson’s preparation and process for bringing each to fruition. In her time Carson’s most acclaimed and popularly successful book was The Sea Around Us, winner of the 1952 nonfiction National Book Award. Her previous book, Under the Sea-Wind, though not as popular, also received high praise from critics. The success of these books established Carson’s reputation as a respected biologist and nature writer, imperative to the eventual impact of Silent Spring.