

Lisa H. Sideris, Kathleen Dean Moore, eds.. *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge*. SUNY Series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. ix + 287 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7914-7472-3.



Reviewed by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer

Published on H-Water (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Justin M. Scott-Coe (Monte Vista Water District; Claremont Graduate University)

Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge is a unique, multidisciplinary compilation gathered to reflect Carson's life, actions, and writings. The editors divided the book into five sections that signify their interpretation of that which is and that which represents Carson. The selection of contributors is also indicative of this interpretation as the authors span the disciplines from ecology to philosophy and more. The editors offer this collection as representation of the importance of Carson's works and beliefs and stress that they share her concerns "about the effects of compartmentalized vision on understanding [and] her enthusiasm for confluences where various currents of knowledge come together" (p. 3). These concerns are eloquently echoed in the choices of construct and inclusion made by the editors.

Part 1, "A Legacy of Activism and Advocacy," contains pieces by Terry Tempest Williams, Jane Lubchenco, and Peter C. List. Through a reflective narrative, Williams informs that Carson represents for her the ideal true patriot in that Carson promoted ecology through democracy and held

those in power accountable for the health and well-being of the environment. Lubchenco admires Carson for her advocacy and identifies Carson's ability to take incredible scientific skills and translate her findings into simple, clear prose accessible to the general public--a concept she calls "science to inform" (p. 34). The question of whether a scientist should be an advocate is the focus of List's essays. By utilizing as examples Carson and George J. Wallace, who influenced Carson, List argues that scientists should not only be advocates but also "stand up for their scientific and moral beliefs" (p. 54).

The contributors to part 2, "Ethics on Land and at Sea," are Philip Cafaro, Susan Power Bratton, J. Baird Callicott, Elyssa Back, and Gary Kroll. For Cafaro, Carson is a philosopher in deed and word (p. 60). He holds that Carson's criticism of human attempts to dominate nature, her reverence for life, and her personal activism may offer a "route forward for environmental ethics" (p. 74). Bratton likens Carson to Aldo Leopold in that Carson does for the sea ethic that which Leopold

did for the land ethic. Callicott and Back offer an examination of Carson's foundational precepts that range from anthropocentrism seen in *Silent Spring* (1962) to Darwinian mysticism found in *Under the Sea-Wind*. The final contributor to this section, Kroll, presents Carson's *The Sea Around Us* (1951) as an ocean-centric piece that promotes the idea that humans can do no harm to the ocean (p. 119). He does acknowledge that Carson changes her position on this, as evidenced in the introduction to the second edition; however, Kroll ultimately attributes the first full ocean ethic to Wesley Marx's 1967 *The Frail Ocean* (p. 128).

Part 3, "Reflections of Gender and Science," features one of the editors, Lisa H. Sideris, and also contains works by Maril Hazlett and Michael Smith. A profound, compassionate look into Carson's life is offered by Sideris as she examines Carson's works and battle with cancer. She explores Carson's belief that neither humans nor nature is supreme and that to understand the whole, inclusive of humans and nature, is the objective. Hazlett complements Sideris's piece by exploring the early life of Carson and discusses her attempts to reconcile "science, sentiment, and spirit" (p. 162). The final work in this section examines Carson's significance based upon her gender. Smith argues that being a female in the male-dominated world of science partially contributed to the attacks she encountered and negatively affected professional banter and scientific discussion. He also examines her influence on the eco-feminist movement that began approximately a decade after the publication of *Silent Spring*. Smith identifies in both the attacks and the inspiration for the movement, Carson's use of the concept of natural balance and the importance she placed upon moral responsibility.

The authors in part 4, "An Ongoing Toxic Discourse," include David Pimentel, Steve Maguire, Christopher Merrill, and Sandra Steingraber. In Pimentel's brief offering, he argues that the United States did not take heed from Carson's pesti-

cide warning and mentions a number of reasons why pesticide use should be reduced. Maguire provides insight on the use of DDT, physically and symbolically, with respect to Carson's work, and discusses how each, DDT and Carson, became icons and played (plays) a role in politics and risk management. Merrill's disquieting piece is a recollection of a trip to the Outer Banks which coincided with Carson's birthday and the discovery of chemicals washing ashore outside of his family's home. The concluding work addresses Steingraber's motivation to research Carson and to develop a piece that would reflect scientific conclusions and personal experience, something that time and circumstance prevented Carson (but not Steingraber) from doing. The uniqueness of this piece lies in the final paragraphs. They ask the reader to provide the last chapter of *Living Downstream* (1997) by explaining how to successfully pull the economy away from the use of cancer-causing chemicals through small steps that could be taken by each individual.

"A Legacy of Wonder," part 5, finishes the collection with another piece by Lisa Sideris, and also includes work by Vera Norwood, and Sideris's co-editor Kathleen Dean Moore. Sideris begins the section on wonder with an examination of Carson's spiritual and secular influences at several points throughout her life. Norwood's focus addresses Carson's appreciation of flora. Norwood walks the reader through many of Carson's works with an eye for her references and reflections upon flora as opposed to the traditional acknowledgement of Carson's emphasis on fauna. Moore finishes the book by answering the question, through the life and writings of Carson: What is the moral significance of wonder (p. 269)?

These selections are intriguing and at times complex. They allow the reader to formulate their own interpretation of the impact Carson had and will continue to have, while guiding the reader to a fuller understanding of the five representations the editors chose to signify Carson. The structure

of the collection is almost as intriguing as the selections contained within it.

Upon completing part 5, readers may find a re-read of the introduction useful as there are no conclusions within the five parts, nor a final one at the end. However, the editors do remind us throughout the introduction that Carson was varied in her approach to advocacy; expressed herself through science, poetry and literature; and attempted to reach the general reader, while successfully speaking to the specialist. With this in mind, reflection upon the various works reminds us of the complexity of Carson.

The uniqueness of this text is obvious when taken as a whole. The attempt to personify Carson through selections that represent the various stages of her life is a fresh approach to understanding this environmental icon. Typically one finds biographies or collections of her work. This compilation is a collection of works about Carson arranged to represent who she was.

This reviewer found parts 2 and 5 to be the most informative sections. The discussion of the comparison of Leopold and Carson leaves the reader pondering not only the desperate need for a concrete ocean ethic, but also larger questions such as why did we focus on land before the sea given our early historical relationship with the sea? Part 5, on wonder, seems to serve two purposes. It plays on Carson's posthumous piece *The Sense of Wonder* (1965), based on the 1950s article "Helping Your Child To Wonder" and helps to inform on her personal philosophy. The selections are indicative of Carson's natural sense of wonder. They represent Carson's unique approach to understanding communities and ecology, one in which nothing was too small for consideration.

If there were one weakness, it would be that some of the notes seemed a bit incestuous. If the intent was to demonstrate Carson's expansive influence, then it might have behooved the editors to find a larger selection of authors who were not utilizing each other's works. This would have

clearly demonstrated the successful tendrils of Carson's activism, advocacy, and published works. Instead, when looking to the notes to find other material, the reader finds mention of a handful of scholars over and over again. Whereas this tends to happen in academia and in and of itself is not a negative, it does detract from the notion that the book represents all of Carson. In conclusion, it should be noted that the editors argue early on that Carson did not intend to be an environmentalist in the modern sense (p. 2). Whereas they may be correct with respect to her intent, this collection clearly indicates that, regardless, Carson was one of the original environmentalists and continues to inspire people today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-water>

Citation: Jeanine A. Clark Bremer. Review of Sideris, Lisa H.; Moore, Kathleen Dean, eds. *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge*. H-Water, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23435>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.