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"Wonders with the Sea: Rachel Carson's Ecological Aesthetic and the Mid-Century Reader"

Hagood, Amanda

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Recent scholarship on the work of the great nature writer, Rachel Carson, posits that her landmark book, *Silent Spring* (1962)—often credited with igniting the modern environmental movement—is best understood in the context of her earlier, extraordinarily popular publications on the natural history of the oceans, which helped establish her as a talented and trustworthy translator of scientific concepts into literary prose. This essay builds upon that idea, showing how Carson's writings not only shaped public understandings of ocean ecology, but also spurred a public passion for all things oceanographic, best embodied in a wave of "Carsonalia"—consumer items and experiences ranging from hats, to Book of the Month Club editions, to liner notes for the NBC Symphony's recording of Debussy's *La Mer*. While these items inspired and expressed the "sense of wonder" that was critical to Carson's ecological aesthetic, I argue, they also subsumed the new "frontier" of the world's oceans into the technological imperialism of the post-World War II United States. As new technologies allowed military and scientific researchers to see deeper into the oceanic depths than ever before, images of the open ocean were domesticated through consumer markets into viewable, readable, and even wearable forms. This commodification of the ocean, and of Carson's ecocentric message, both enabled and frustrated her attempts to promote ecological literacy. Yet they also reveal much about our contemporary relationship to the world's oceans, which remain sites of both enduring wonder and extraordinary exploitation.

— Adapted from the author's abstract.

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Further readings:

- Blocher, Ewald, and Stefan Esselborn. "'Wild creatures are my friends:' Rachel Carson, Scientist and Writer." Translated from the German by Katie Ritson. Munich: Rachel Carson Center, 2010.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring.* 40th anniversary edition. With essays by Edward O. Wilson and Linda Lear. New York: Mariner Books, 2002.
- Sideris, Lisa H., and Kathleen Dean Moore, eds. *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge.* SUNY series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008.

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