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Book Review: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring

Brandi Hope Johnson

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.

“How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death event to their own kind?” Rachel Carson's question, asked in her 1962 text *Silent Spring*, requires the reader to take stock in the conditions under which Americans at the time were dealing with pest control. This title, *Silent Spring*, comes from the silence in many forests and meadows due to the poisoning of songbirds, insects and other invertebrates, and even plants. This now historical account of the use of pesticides has raised America's awareness of the dangers of agricultural chemicals that had become commonly accepted during this time. People from all generations may benefit from this book because it raises awareness of practices that are unsustainable and offers critical knowledge of effective alternative methods for pest control.

The book describes the chemical warfare in the United States and other countries that have killed so many organisms. It begins by explaining the varieties of chemicals that have been used along with the documented affects they exert on specific life forms. It explains different techniques that have been used to apply these chemicals and how they move from the point of source through virtually every piece of the food web. The last chapter points out that the solution to the problem must be two processes happening simultaneously: first, experts must work towards a cure for those already affected, and second, they must isolate and remove as much of the contaminant as possible from the environment to prevent further damage. The argument is not to avoid pest control altogether, but to find techniques that have been developed in a more natural way as an alternative to artificially-made chemicals.

Carson touches on several controversial topics that are accepted by environmentalists yet harshly rejected by others, especially those who profit from pesticide sales. Because chemical companies profited so much from these pesticides, many companies denied Carson's claims and attempted to discredit her research. However, once she began tracking the effects of these chemicals, she found a trail of devastation. For those organisms that did not succumb immediately, the chemical was stored and amplified in the fat cells. She explains how exposure to chemicals everyday creates an accumulation of poison in the body that affects the liver and can inhibit some of life's essential functions and even cause cancer in her research subjects.

Carson writes exquisitely about biology in a way she can be easily understood; she uses a direct voice, limited footnotes, and simple language with strong meanings to create a text that is easily accessible to lay readers who lack a deep science background. This approach played, and continues to play, a critical part in relaying information from science labs to the general public. One quote reads, "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will ensure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter." These words create strong imagery in the reader's mind. The book was written during a time in which industrial factory production and agricultural use of pesticides were growing exponentially and many people had forgotten humanity's connection to nature. The exposure from this publication helped spread awareness during the beginnings of the environmental revolution. Rachel Carson conveyed the historical, cultural, and environmental value of *Silent Spring* to anyone interested in more sustainable practices.

This book is suggested for anyone who has any love whatsoever for the planet they inhabit and anyone interested in sustainability. The chemical warfare at that time was an

extremely real threat to all life, yet pesticides were rained down from airplanes onto all vegetation, into the soil, into the water, into the worms, the birds, the livestock, and ultimately into the people. The tone of Carson's text is somewhat dark, but human degradation of planet earth is never a light topic. The topic is difficult to discuss, and certain selections of this book can bring about feelings of guilt and remorse while reading. However, this is sometimes necessary to help society realize the necessity of sustainability. Carson writes, "We must change our philosophy, abandon our attitude of human superiority and admit that in many cases in natural environments we find ways and means of limiting populations of organisms in a more economical way than we can do it ourselves." This message, which she wanted to convey to both her generation and future generations, is that humanity must look to nature for the answers if we want our forests and meadows filled anew with the sound of the songbirds.