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The Church of Rachel Carson

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One hundred years after her birth in May of 1907, it's difficult to underestimate Rachel Carson's influence. Unfortunately, it's all bad. That hasn't stopped her from remaining an academic deity to the campus Left.

A wildlife bureaucrat by profession (she eventually became the chief publications editor for the Fish and Wildlife Service), Carson wrote what has become the seminal text of the environmental movement: 1962's *Silent Spring*. The book, a gloomy, sometimes hysterical tract, argues that chemicals in the environment do enormous harm to humans and wildlife. The pesticide DDT gets singled out for particular blame and is indicted for destroying wildlife and causing enormous problems in humans. While DDT may harm certain types of wildlife, nobody has even come close to proving Carson's claim that "one in four" people might die from chemically caused cancers, her strong implication that the most pesticides were first developed as a chemical weapons, or her new-age speculation that human bodies build up enormous stores of dangerous environmental toxins.

In the wake of the book, however, DDT faced a near-total worldwide ban. In the developed world, where alternatives were available, this ban had little consequence. For the world's truly poor, the ban on DDT proved a disaster.

As a result, deaths from mosquito-borne malaria and other diseases that the pesticide had controlled skyrocketed.

Millions, most of them children under five living in the underdeveloped world, have died as a result. Clearly, the book had a negative influence.

But that hasn't stopped the academic Left and its political allies from continuing to lionize Carson. The book remains required reading on leading college campuses and has evolved into the centerpiece of a sort of environmental theology. All too often, it's read the way fundamentalists read religious texts: without any critical analysis. I wanted to see how widely the book still found use on college campuses. Through a series of telephone calls and web searches, I found that all eight Ivy League campuses stock in their book store and at least three required it as course

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reading last term. (At least two others have required it at some point in the recent past.) Other colleges like Pomona and MIT also have also assigned it as required reading.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with reading *Silent Spring* or assigning it in class. Although the book seems shrill and overwritten in places, plenty of people have had praise for its prose style. Given its influence, furthermore, anyone who wants to understand the political background of the environmental movement could benefit from reading it.

But it's interesting how it gets assigned. Simply by virtue of being 45 years old, it has almost no use as a scientific text. No field of science pursued on university campuses is anything close to a completed body of knowledge. Even moderately advanced courses in fields like planetary astronomy, cell biology, and a host of other disciplines rarely even have printed textbooks because the fields are evolving much too fast for publishers to keep up with new developments. Unlike a work of history or literature, scientific texts expire after awhile. Thus Carson doesn't get assigned in hard science courses: the courses where she's assigned all deal with politics, environmentalism, and, in one case, feminism. She's a favorite of people who with few real scientific credentials, people who prefer a quasi-religion of environmentalism to serious intellectual inquiry or critical thought about environmental issues.

A recent anthology of essays about Carson issued in honor of her 100th Birthday, [*Courage for the Earth: Writers, Scientists, and Activists Celebrate the Life and Writing of Rachel Carson*](#), includes only one piece by a bona fide research scientist (Harvard's E.O. Wilson.) Although a few authors do hold doctorates in the sciences, they are all professional writers or activists rather than researchers. Nonetheless, there's an academically oriented non-profit group (devoted to environmental causes of cancer) named after Carson and her alma mater has established a research institute that also bears her name. Counties she was associated with can't seem to stop naming schools after her and she's received just about every major civilian award the United States has to offer.

In context, this shouldn't come as a surprise. To those who lionize her it doesn't matter that Carson's work was destructive or that it's out of date.

It's considered worthy of study for because it affirms certain spiritual values. The call for papers from the group "Nature and Environmental Writers - College and University Educators" gives a sense of how Carson gets taught today. Among other topics, the conference calls for papers that emphasize:

- The timelessness and constancy of all things within the web of creation.
- Awakening of emotional responses to nature.
- Cultivating a sense of wonder among children and adults as an emotional response to the living world.

Papers on all of these topics by necessity present subjective value judgments: Particular, romantic (that is, strongly emotional) ways of looking at the world. They may be worth writing but the content, one assumes, would be much closer to theology than science. People are, of course, entitled to hold whatever values suit them. But, given the negative consequences of Carson's work, it's difficult to see much merit in the academic quasi-religion that has sprung up around her.

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