

Who are some female role models we can discuss with our children? Mary Ellen Smith, the Famous Five, and Florence Nightingale serve well. Rachel Carson is another. *Rachel Carson: A Witness for Nature* by Linda Lear is fascinating. Lear, a History Professor at George Washington University and at the Smithsonian Institution, traced Carson's life in detail. Rachel Louise Carson, born in 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania, saw her hometown on the Allegheny River transformed from a rural town with woods, farmland, picturesque streets and pretty frame dwellings set among overhanging trees into an endlessly ugly, dreary, dirty, working-class town squeezed between two coal-burning factories. The Allegheny became polluted, the Appalachians were denuded, the emerging coal and oil industries fouled the air, soil and water.

Lack of money was always an issue. Her father had trouble finding work that paid enough to support his family's modest life. Rachel's mother - constrained by restrictions on work for married women - gave piano lessons at home. Rachel's older sister dropped out of high school, became a stenographer, married, was deserted and remarried all by the time she was twenty-three. Rachel's older brother survived World War I and returned home to a hollow career as a tradesman.

Rachel attended a Christian college. She won a \$100 scholarship, but her family still had to borrow and sell assets to raise the other \$800 for each year of College. Carson, shy and with acne from shoulders to forehead, excelled at university, switched majors from English to biology, graduated and received a scholarship to Johns Hopkins University Graduate School. She didn't complete her Masters degree until 1932 because she studied half-time and worked half-time to support her parents.

After graduate school, she became a US Bureau of Fisheries biologist. She wrote features on wildlife, hunting and fishing for newspapers and magazines as a second job. Rachel's sister died when Rachel was 30 and Rachel became guardian of her nieces. Rachel learned what life offers single women with no means of support. She resigned from the civil service in 1952 after she published *The Sea Around Us*. She was admitted into a doctorate program, but she never completed a PhD for lack of money and the need to care for her family.

Carson became interested in the use of pesticides because of events like the "Cranberry Scandal" and the "fire ant eradication" program. In 1959, a pesticide registered for use on cranberry bogs after berry harvest, was being applied before harvest. Carcinogenic pesticide residue was found on fruit released for sale. In 1957, the US government attempted an ill-conceived program to eradicate fire ants. It was unclear if the ants were a risk, and residential areas were being sprayed without notice given to homeowners. These events led Carson to write *Silent Spring* in 1962.

After *Silent Spring*, there followed cruel criticism. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson wrote to Dwight Eisenhower, "Why a spinster with no children was so concerned about genetics?" and she was "probably a Communist."

Carson was diagnosed with cancer two years before she published *Silent Spring*; she died in 1964, but *Silent Spring* lives. It led to inquiries by the President's Science Advisory Committee and by a Senate Committee. These hearings led to changes in pesticide registration, labeling, use, to pest management practices, the Clean Water Bill and a change in the public's willingness to trust the government. *Silent Spring* may have encouraged the civil rights activists, anti-Vietnam war activists, environmental activists and the anti-World Trade Organization activists who visited Seattle in 1999. Carson's life is a triumph for us all and she is a role model for our children.