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Priscilla Coit Murphy. *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. xvi, 254 pp.; US \$34.95. ISBN 1558494766.

Silent Spring (1962), by marine biologist Rachel Carson, has been compared to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other crusading books that "spoke truth to power" (a phrase attributed to the early Quakers) and changed American culture. *Silent Spring's* message has been often misinterpreted as advocating a ban on all pesticides, when Carson's goal was to inform the public about the dangers of a variety of chemicals, such as chlordane and DDT, and to caution generally about the consequences of the profit motive of a powerful postwar chemical industry operating unchecked by any level of government. Carson's authority as a scientist and as a bestselling author (of *The Sea Around Us* and *The Edge of the Sea*) quietly prevailed during the considerable controversy that ensued. Her message got the American Congress's attention and led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and the federal ban against DDT in 1972.

Priscilla Coit Murphy has chosen a splendidly apt subject for her examination of the relationship between books and mass media, and between books and their related forms, such as magazine articles excerpted from them. ("Silent Spring" appeared in the *New Yorker* over three issues in June 1962.) Making use of book historian Robert Darnton's communications circuit, Murphy takes apart, piece by piece, the interaction between a book and the culture in which it moved (Darnton's "social and economic conjuncture"). As a very good writer telling a familiar yet mostly unknown story, she presents detailed and thorough research, and her analysis and arguments are convincing. She brings a mass-media-studies perspective to the book in society that is quite surprising to scholars who are used to starting with the book and looking outward. We learn that books have been excluded from media studies because they have been seen as limited to an intimate, rather than public, relationship between author and

reader. *What a Book Can Do* proves that a book does indeed exist in the public sphere and shows exactly how this comes about.

Murphy begins with an excellent historical context on American media, science, and government, Carson's career in science and letters, the *New Yorker* and Houghton Mifflin houses, and so on. She then follows the creation, publication, and reaction to the *New Yorker* articles and Carson's book, ending her case study after the first main period of reaction and Carson's death in April 1964. The initial stir in June 1962 was so great that Houghton Mifflin ordered a first print run of 100,000 in September; by Christmas, 500,000 copies of the book were in print. Murphy's chapters "Opposition," "Media," and "Audience" document, in fascinating detail, the reaction from the chemical industry and its efforts to delay or stop publication; its media counter-campaign to discredit Carson personally and undermine her work, reactions from professional associations, grassroots groups, and individuals alike; national and local media reviews of the book and coverage of the debate; and, finally, the congressional hearings prompted by the report of President Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee in 1963. The archival material consulted seems to have been very rich, and includes the Rachel Carson Papers at Yale, the Houghton Mifflin Archive at Harvard, the National Archives of the Department of Agriculture, and the *New Yorker* Archives at the New York Public Library. I have learned elsewhere that researchers' use of the latter archive is under notoriously strict control by corporate owner Condé Nast. With an eerie echo of Carson's and Houghton Mifflin's experience with Big Chemical, it raises a highly disturbing question about balance between the need to protect the rights to unpublished material (and the rights of people mentioned in it) and demands from corporations to approve manuscripts of scholarly texts. Murphy has distilled much useful information for us in spite of the obstacles she must have encountered. She has added extensive research in scholarly sources and other periodicals to complete her comprehensive account of what *Silent Spring* could, and did, accomplish.

A concluding chapter sums up the phenomenon that was Carson's book and the importance of its book format compared to that of its magazine version and her other writings of Carson's. It offers insights, for example, into the "Implications for the Future of Books." Finally, an appended chapter provides a very interesting overview of the topography of the interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that support Murphy's work. While scholars might prefer a longer treatment here and a more integrated text, separate presentation of this

material may have been the publisher's choice, in order to make the work more accessible to the general reader. To the same end, perhaps, the attractive and easily read text is unencumbered by footnotes, but extensive and thorough endnotes (and a much less comprehensive index) are there for those wishing to delve. Bibliographical references do not stand alone, but are incorporated in the endnotes. The volume is part of the series *Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book*. If I had a wish, it would be that the University of Massachusetts Press editors at had expanded, not condensed, Murphy's doctoral thesis (of a similar title), on which this book is based. The thesis has a full bibliography of sources and information about editions and translations. I suppose my next comments on the resulting book are addressed less to the author than to her scholarly press.

This reviewer has taken a seat on Carl Spadoni's bandwagon of late, the one with the bumper sticker that reads, "It's the Book, Stupid!" Spadoni points out an unfortunate reluctance on the part of many researchers in book- and print-based fields to deal with bibliographical description of any kind beyond the usual list of sources. Despite an avowed focus on the "materiality" of the forms of texts, too many studies shy away from putting even a toe into the waters of bibliography, perceived as murky and deep enough to drown the credibility of scholars not formally trained to dive in. I repeat that Murphy's "book about a book" is a thoroughly researched work of applied and theoretical scholarship, but the focus on the importance of the book form of *Silent Spring* calls the glaring omission of bibliography to our attention. Good book history can be done without it, and Murphy's investigation of the popular and media interaction launched *by* a book is a success notwithstanding, but a close reading of the premise of her study seems to promise more attention to the physical book (books as objects but especially Carson's book) than is delivered. Even a selected enumerative bibliography of *Silent Spring*, as an appendix, would have enriched the work by portraying even to the general reader, in a concise overview, how the book "did" after 1964 (it has never gone out of print), and how its message travelled around the world in translations, for example, to former Iron Curtain countries that were excluded from early publishing arrangements. Furthermore, *Silent Spring* included six original illustrations in its first edition. Through correspondence between illustrators Lois and Louis Darling and editor Paul Gross, editorial policy is revealed in a scant paragraph (we learn only what

the illustrations should *not* look like), but the illustrations which were finally chosen are not described. *What a Book Can Do* carries sixteen of its own illustrations (photos, advertisements, editorials, etc. from the archives), but not one example of an illustration from the original edition of *Silent Spring*. To be fair, Murphy's illustrations do represent a broad spectrum of examples chosen from a great wealth of images, and they are tied closely to her main story, the media debates.

Another, very minor, quibble concerning the scope of the work might have been disarmed, again, by some simple bibliographical detail. As with the work of many of our American colleagues, it has to do with that large, pink, empty space on the other side of Buffalo. A slightly longer, more detailed treatment could have added extra rigour to the chapter entitled "Audiences" had it established the Canadian contingent of the audiences – readers, listeners, and viewers – Murphy describes so well within American borders. In 1962 and later, Canadians read the Houghton Mifflin editions of *Silent Spring* (and the Plon edition from France, *Printemps silencieux*). We also subscribed to the *New Yorker*, *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, and other periodicals which covered the controversy and received letters from "Canada, Europe and beyond" (our only mention). Circulation figures quoted might have been qualified. It is not a question of expanding the study to describe other, international audiences, especially when some Canadians were tuned in at the same moment as our American neighbours to the watershed *CBS Reports* television documentary that aired 30 March 1963. Still, this is a small point, and it is not fair to ask unlimited scope of authors and editors. It is reasonable, however, to see the potential for improvement in the way scholars amass, organize, and share their findings. If their subject demands it, they must break through the barriers that are perceived to exist between countries, cultures, languages, and disciplines. This is a current opportunity, and a continuing challenge, for book historians. Many discipline-specific methods, theoretical approaches, and varied archival resources lie at our disposal, but the challenge is to select and put to good use, with the authority of sufficient rigour, elements of the vast areas of scholarship that form the basis of book history, even if one has not mastered a given discipline in its entirety. Our mission is to navigate, but not to swallow, the seas around us.

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