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**Intervention: *Touching the oceans***

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Although Rachel Carson is most well-known for her text *Silent Spring –* a book which would reveal the ill-effects of pesticide use for the environment – it is her trio of texts concerning the oceans which have always held my attention. I picked up a copy of *The Sea Around Us*, the middle book of her oceanic trilogy, somewhat by accident, in a second-hand shop in a seaside town in Essex, one of the counties bordering London. It was the richly illustrated dustcover adorned with a sail ship, an octopus, fish and seaweed, which would capture my attention. Later, when I opened the book, it would be Carson’s words. I was setting out on my own voyage, a doctoral degree which would send me out to sea. At the time, I was building an oceanic library, collecting books which I thought looked interesting. I naively knew nothing of Carson, her background as a marine biologist or her reputation in environmental politics. I am glad I had that ignorance. I read the book at face value. I remember feeling I had leapt into the sea.

In *The Sea Around Us* Carson traces the many and diverse ways that we are connected to the seas; the linkages between what we take to be ‘land’ and what we understand to be the ‘sea’; the planetary and extra-terrestrial forces that are intertwined with our oceans (the winds, the sun and the moon), and the non-human life integral to oceans which we have sought to know and understand. To convey such connections, Carson offers up to the reader a deep and detailed discussion of the geology and topography of the sea floor and the continual process of sediment snowfall on the bed of the ocean. She conveys an intricate discussion of biological life found in deep seas, cloaked by permanent darkness. Carson dispels any notion that the seas are monotonous surfaces, plains of undifferentiated blues, as often depicted on maps. She shows their colour, their texture, their incessant movement and their season changes. She relates attempts – from the distant past to what was then the present – where humans have sought to measure, record and make sense of these mobile liquid, three-dimensional spaces. In a book that takes us from the very earliest development of our seas, to her present day, and ‘man’s’ relationships with the ocean, this book provided – and continues to provide – a comprehensive engagement with the most dominant physical feature of the Earth.

Yet Carson’s book is so much more than a beautifully articulated foray into the relations associated with our oceans. Whilst on the one hand a book about science and discovery, a text that tells us how other people have helped us know the seas around us; it is also a book where Carson’s own voice that emerges. In discussing the many connections and mergings that form our oceans – the seamless border between ‘man’ and sea, sea and shore – it is not (for me at least) a purely scientific history and explanation that results. Rather, Carson’s account is an embodied one where it is *her* words that forge another connection; one between reader and writer. In the folds of the tides that Carson so elaborately explains; in the oceanic depths she describes, and in the lively depictions of sea life she conveys, Carson introduces us, and then submerges us in the seas and oceans. She reminds us those seas and oceans are there. She reminds us of their agency and power, their fragility and their hidden wonders. Yet she not only reminds us. She takes us there through language. The power of Carson’s work is no so much what she says, but how she says it. To read the text is to search and survey the ocean along with Carson. Her writing is so richly evocative that it is almost possible to see, hear, touch, and taste the oceans she describes. Carson’s wonderment of the seas around her, becomes our wonderment of the seas around us.

Such statements about the book might sound exaggerated. They are not. I first read Carson’s text when I returned home from my Essex beach excursion. I was living in flatshare in North London. Despite London’s firm maritime links, to live in the city, and certainly away from the river, is to forget you might be anywhere close to the sea. I lived opposite a fire station and sirens pierced the air, day and night. A concrete landscape was present from the paving slabs under my feet to buildings around me. I remember vividly though, my first foray into *The Sea Around Us.* I was at sea in the city. I started to look at the spaces and places around me, anew. When it rained, had that rain come from clouds, clouds formed from the droplets of the water of the ocean? Did that rain carry debris and soil from the streets, to the sewer, to the river, to the sea?

What this book achieves then, is an ability to make us think differently about the seas and oceans. Although the book is, in many ways, a classic scientific text in that it ‘matter-of-factly’ relates knowledge of the ocean collected and collated through the positivist and realist endeavour of objective pursuits, the book is far more than ‘hard’ science. It is science feminized. Certainly this book is a product of the time. We might, at first glance, read it through a critical feminist lens and see that it simply enshrines long-held dichotomies which align femininity with nature and masculinity with culture. Carson speaks of the ocean – of nature – using language that cements these associations: the ‘mother sea’, plant life, crustaceans, fish and mammals as the ‘children’ of the ocean. ‘Man’, she notes, is the force that works on this sea, changing its thermostat and extracting its treasures. She describes the efforts to make known the oceans and these are predominantly the expeditions of male explorers.

Yet if we are to look beyond the obvious – and the easy critiques we might wage of this writing – Carson presents a view of the ocean that is beyond its time. *The Sea Around Us* is science writ-large and communicated by a woman. The words are powerful but they are not conclusive. Carson does not say, definitively, that the oceans came into being in this way, and not that way. She has authority yet without claiming to know all of the answers. She presents something beautifully partial, acknowledging the varied approaches, theories and practices that have attempted to make sense of our oceans, conveying ‘facts’ as they were then known, but without a gaze of objectivity. She gives the reader an account of the seas that is emergent, and subject to change. Whilst she charts ocean beginnings, she acknowledges we may never know how the first oceans came to be. Whilst she outlines the current state of the oceans, it is with a recognition that we know not what their future may be. Such an approach chimes with more recent trends towards Deleuzian thinking, of a world with no essence, a world that is always becoming. Each chapter concludes with openness, with a sense there is more to come in terms of our relationships with the ocean and their relations with other planetary processes. Weaving together scientific discovery, with biblical passages and poetic verse as Carson does, helps build a picture of the oceans that is altogether something more radical.

Some 10 years on from when I first read Carson’s book, I now live overlooking the ocean. Liverpool is a maritime city, its edges skirting the River Mersey, stretching out to the Irish Sea. Ships come and go. Tides ebb and flow. Gulls circle the skies above looking for bait below. Returning to Carson’s book again for the purpose of this article, it takes on new meaning. I still feel the beauty of the words. But different passages chime with me now than they did whilst living in London. The ‘gray beginnings’ of our oceans, which Carson describes, confound me. On looking out to the sea I am struck by the temporalities of the ocean. There is a twice daily regularity as the sea advances and retreats. But that motion is millions of years old. The ocean I look upon is in a state of perpetual renewal and change, yet it is also an age-old constant. Something that was there long before I was, and will remain long after I am gone. Carson talks of an ‘encircling sea’ and I feel that acutely. Where I stand might have once been water, or ice, and now it is land, but a land made and touched by oceanic processes. The air I breathe is air that has brushed over the ocean, carrying its faint, and sometimes pungent scent. I see now, more than ever, how the sea encircles us. We are not, and have never been, separate from the seas. In Carson’s words, they are all around us.