

Rachel Carson: What Might Have Been?

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Photos by Dr. Robert K. Musil*



Rachel Carson sign at Beaufort

area now also features an ultra-modern [Duke University Marine Lab](#). Beaufort today is a small, but increasingly upscale town with historic houses, a new luxury hotel, and numerous yachts. But when Carson worked and explored there, it was quiet and isolated.

Rachel Carson fell in love with Beaufort at the edge of the sea. She walked the tidal zones and beaches, searched the sands at night by flashlight, and often lay there simply listening to the shore sounds, imagining, as well as studying, how they came to be. A meticulous researcher and beautiful writer, Carson turned in her text for a USFWS publication on what she found at Beaufort to her boss, Elmer Higgins. Higgins told her it simply wouldn't do. It was, he told Carson, too good for a government booklet. He urged her, instead, to send it off for publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*. They loved it. Her essay, "Undersea," was published in September, 1937. It caught the eye of the noted writer, explorer and illustrator Henrik Van Loon who arranged a meeting in January, 1938 with Simon & Schuster's senior editor, Quincy Howe.



Duke Marine Lab



Inn and Suites at Beaufort

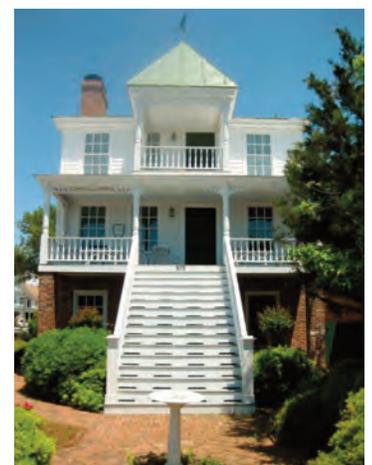


Yachts at Beaufort

The result was *Under the Sea-Wind*, Rachel Carson's first book. It came out November 1, 1941 when Carson had just turned thirty-four. It was a critical success. William Beebe, the noted oceanographer and ornithologist, reviewed it favorably in the *Saturday Review* and *Under the Sea-Wind* was picked by the Scientific Book Club as its December selection.

Carson seemed headed for success, perhaps literary stardom. But on December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. America was at war. Priorities, attention, spending, reading all shifted. *Under the Sea-Wind* slipped beneath the waves. When it was reissued in 1952, following Carson's second book and blockbuster best-seller *The Sea around Us*, *Under the Sea-Wind* leapt onto the *New York Times* best-seller list and stayed there.

No wonder. Its opening sketches the Beaufort seaside as night settles in. The sentences slide as sensuously as the slight splash of waves in the sheltered inlet. We are introduced to and feel the mystery of the creatures who have, over eons, evolved from the sea and now inhabit its ever-changing edge.



Historic Beaufort waterfront house

*Black skimmer from Fotalia

The Island lay in shadows only a little deeper than those that were swiftly stealing across the sound from the east...With the dusk a strange bird came to the island from its nesting grounds on the outer banks. Its wings were pure black, and from tip to tip their spread was more than the length of a man's arm. It flew steadily and without haste across the sound, its progress as measured and meaningful as that of the shadows which little by little were dulling the bright water path. The bird was called Rynchops, the black skimmer.



White Ibis



Fiddler crab scurrying to a hole



Black Skimmer

Today, visitors to Beaufort can catch a small Rachel Carson ferry for a short hop over to the beach reserve named in her honor. You can walk the sands and marshy paths she did, watch fiddler crabs scurry into their tiny holes, gather sand dollars and shells, see sanderlings run mechanically along the beach, hear the sharp cries of the willets, watch white ibis probe the mud, and observe oystercatchers dig with their bills in the beds of oysters. And, if you are lucky, you can still see Rynchops, the black skimmer, glide low on wide black wings, slitting the water with his large red-orange scissors bill to scoop up sustenance. These sights and sounds were a source of wonder for Carson. She sought through imagination and science to understand and describe how life emerged and survived to offer such bounty and such beauty.

Under the Sea-Wind was Rachel Carson's favorite book. Perhaps because it was her first, perhaps because it reveals the glories of nature before her later warnings about chemicals and bombs and factory-produced animals were so sorely needed.

Under the Sea-Wind barely sold 2,000 copies during the war. Rachel Carson continued with the USFWS producing brochures, pamphlets, and booklets that are still considered masterpieces. And she continued to freelance, hoping to augment her meager government salary. Carson also edited, reviewed, and was familiar with the latest research findings from government scientists that crossed her desk.

At the [USFWS Patuxent Research Refuge in Maryland](#), researchers had been studying the effects of DDT, the miracle chemical that had saved untold lives in World War II by holding back the mosquito-borne scourges malaria and typhus. Their studies revealed that there were adverse health effects for humans exposed to DDT and other pesticides. As the war was ending, it was clear that pesticides would be used widely at home once peacetime returned. Carson approached the *Readers' Digest* with a proposal to write an article about this important research on the potential dangers of wartime chemicals. She was rejected.

Not until the late fifties, when robins were dying on suburban and college lawns and majestic eagles, ospreys, peregrines, and pelicans were failing to reproduce because DDT was thinning their egg shells, did William Shawn of the *New Yorker* accept Rachel Carson's proposal to write a series of articles on pesticides. What Rachel called her "poison book" or *Silent Spring* was born. When it came out in 1962, like *The Sea around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*, and like *Under the Sea-Wind*, it, too, became a huge best-seller. It caught the eye of President Kennedy and the United States Senate. The rest is history. But if you walk in Rachel's footsteps along the shores in Beaufort and read entranced through her first, beloved book, *Under the Sea-Wind*, you may wonder why, even regret, that we had to wait so long to see things as she did. ■

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