

LETTERS

More Comments on "Silent Spring"

DEAR SIR:

In the course of reading a *New York Times* book review (favorable) of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" this evening, I realized a very unfortunate implication in the letter (unfavorable) by Dr. Sperling and Dr. Geiling which appeared in the Sept. 24 issue of C&EN. In discussing the ability of "all living things," including people, to adapt "not necessarily over eons of time or generations of progeny" to possibly harmful chemicals, the professors note that, "In fact, the resistance of insects to pesticides is an excellent illustration of such adaptation." Of course, we all realize that insects do make the adaptation with sometimes dismaying ease. This, in fact, leads to the survival of the species at cost of a large majority of the individuals over a few generations. Somehow, I cannot bring myself to willingly involve my own progeny in this form of adaptation! Further, has Miss Carson actually advocated complete abandonment of the use of herbicides and insecticides? Or was it just abandonment of such practices as aerial spraying and the indiscriminate use of substances which could bear a rather horrible resemblance to thalidomide?

ROBERT S. MERKEL
Charlottesville, Va.

DEAR SIR:

Dr. Darby's review of Rachel Carson's book, "Silent Spring" (C&EN, Oct. 1, page 60), is a good one. A review of this type is generally not brought to the attention of the Book-of-the-Month Club patrons. This is illustrated in a report about what reviewers are saying, as given in an ad which appeared in the Oct. 9 issue of the *New York Times*. Virtually all of the reviews expect this book to produce a noisy autumn since most of the reviewers tend to side with her point of view.

The most proper criticism must be leveled at Miss Carson's technique. It is reminiscent of the radio program of Oct. 30, 1938, in which Orson Welles described an invasion from Mars. Her failure to present the overwhelming truth of the other side of the story—the success and proper regulation of pesticides—is quite deplorable.

If the major effect is to make people

aware of the potential hazards of private use of economic poisons which are used without heed to label directions, then the book will have been worthwhile. If this happens, then Miss Carson will have achieved what manufacturers, national safety councils, public health officials, and poison control centers have been unable to do—shake the smugness and complacency out of individuals in their daily use of any type of spray, medicine, pesticide, disinfectant, etc.

Logically, the best defense that the Food and Drug Administration and Department of Agriculture officials can use against her is that they will keep up their excellent offense in the registration and regulation of pesticides, food additives, and drugs in general. It is certainly hoped that they will not decide that they must defend their position.

Dr. Darby states that, "in view of her scientific qualifications in contrast to those of our distinguished scientific leaders and statesmen, this book should be ignored." His final statement is: "The responsible scientist should read this book to understand the ignorance of those writing on the subject and the educational task which lies ahead." We can't both ignore it and read it. The latter is the more proper approach. Everyone interested in this field should read it and properly understand her weighted choice of events.

... Dr. Darby says: "They [tolerances] include a very wide margin of safety, usually being set at 100 times the *minimal* amount of the substance which produces any physiologic effect . . ." This should read: ". . . one/one-hundredth . . ." Also, tolerances are not usually set at this level, but rather are not permitted to exceed this level.

CHARLES F. GORDON
Philadelphia, Pa.

DEAR SIR:

Congratulations for printing Dr. W. J. Darby's review of "Silent Spring." I found it illuminating and stimulating. Through his review, the other exchanges in the pages of C&EN, and the Oct. 15 C&EN report of the interview with Mr. W. W. Dykstra, we will get at the true state of affairs.

It seems to me, however, that Dr.

Darby does not completely avoid using the same method of indictment he condemns in Rachel Carson. I may agree with him that she uses excessive emotional appeal and/or other questionable methods, but these will help generate necessary action in some areas that have not been wholly beyond reproach.

Similar methods have been sometimes necessary to get action in the whole area of air and water pollution in various parts of the country when otherwise, public and private groups responsible for pollution would have taken their own sweet time in trying to do anything.

Scientists are human beings first and scientists second. They, too, are endowed with strength and weakness, good and guile, devotion and deceit, sacrifice and selfishness, foresight and foolishness just as other human beings.

J. D. CLENDENIN
Murrysville, Pa.

DEAR SIR:

Without in any way wishing to pass judgment on the merits or demerits of Miss Carson's thesis in her book, "Silent Spring," I feel some criticism is in order of the review of this book, published in the Oct. 1 issue of C&EN. Having been a precious metals chemist all my life, the subject under discussion is certainly not within my field, and I do not pretend to have a valid basis for forming a judgment. The title (presumably the editor's contribution) and the tone of the review make me wonder if we chemists are not trying to hide something here. Both the title and the review portray an attitude ill becoming a scientist. Following so soon our disastrous failure in the thalidomide episode in Europe, a little humility on the part of chemists is in order.

Says Dr. Darby: "She fails to recognize that 'the consumer' includes the producer, farmer, wholesaler, retailer, equipment manufacturer, their families, and even the scientists who evaluate the chemicals." The same could have been said about the consumers of thalidomide, and yet this did not prevent the birth of approximately 5000 deformed children. We must be naive indeed, and unrealistic, to believe that because scientists are consumers, they will exercise due care in recommending the use of poisons.

Similar abuse was heaped on the late Harvey W. Wiley for his efforts