

## *The Book of Life: A Novel*

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In my novel-in-progress, the protagonist Louise McBride, a fictional reimagining of Rachel Carson, the globally renowned twentieth-century environmentalist, grapples with her growing awareness of climate warming and her shifting relationship to the sea while contending with the personal cost of completing her book on the reckless overuse of biocides, given the metastasizing cancer that may kill her. In the novel's present, set before the completion of "the poison book" (as Carson sometimes called *Silent Spring*, her epoch-defining 1962 work on the proliferation of industrial pesticides), Louise McBride speaks to an unseen interlocutor from her home on the coast of Maine. Her beloved companion, modeled on Carson's intimate, Dorothy Freeman, desperately wants her not to proceed with the book: she is the lyric writer of volumes about the sea; the cost, which may include her life, is too great. On the verge of leaving Maine for the summer, possibly forever, McBride argues as to why she must keep writing. Given to thinking in geological timespans and into the interconnected web of life beyond the human, McBride turns to her lifelong relationship with the sea in order to make her argument. Once she believed the planet's oceans lay beyond the reach of human harm; her life's existential rift is the profound recognition that this is no longer so. Nowhere is safe from the materialist, industrial/human desire for planetary control. How does one epistemologically reconstruct the world in the face of this recognition? How does one reincorporate a capacity for wonder? These questions fuel the narrative, which, moving through the first sixty years of the twentieth century, is structured through a sequence of sections and interstitial/intertidal moments.

In *The Book of Life* (the title taken from Carson's uncompleted work about the living world), I intend to write into a series of unconventional intimacies: between human and more-than-human, particularly the world of the sea and the liminal world of the shore, also into unconventional human intimacies. Rachel Carson was often described in the press as a spinster, an attribution that overlooked the tentacular nature of the care for others in which she engaged: for her mother, for the great-nephew whom she adopted, for her unconventional beloved, as well as for the natural world. In a recent essay for the cultural/political online magazine *Noema*, I have written about how the familial role of the aunt, rather than the parent, offers a crucial model of care in a time of climate crisis, since it asks us to care altruistically for others who are not 'our own.' In profound ways, Carson (and my character Louise McBride) embody and enact aunt care, a form of care that speaks to me, personally, and one that, unlike 'mothering,' does not have a verb form in the English language. I intend to write imaginatively into this lack.

While much nonfiction has been written about Carson's work and life, I can find almost no fiction, other than works for young readers. *Silent Spring*, a prominent presence on my parents' bookshelves during my childhood, is a work of transnational importance still read and discussed half a century later. I intend, imaginatively, to enter the decisive post-Second-World-War period whose legacies (political, social, chemical) shape my life and our present, in order to cast a lens on the present—and alternate presents that might have been.