In 1965, Ralph Nader published the muckraking book *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile*. The book became a best-seller right away. It also prompted the passage of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, seat-belt laws in 49 states (all but New Hampshire) and a number of other road-safety initiatives. Today, Nader is perhaps best known for his role in national politics—and in particular for the controversial role he played in the 2000 presidential election—but *Unsafe at Any Speed* was the book that made him famous and lent credibility to his work as a consumer advocate.

“For over half a century,” Nader’s book began, “the automobile has brought death, injury, and the most inestimable sorrow and deprivation to millions of people.” Technology existed that could make cars much safer, he argued, but automakers had little incentive to use them: On the contrary, “the gigantic costs of the highway carnage in this country support a service industry”—doctors, lawyers, police officers, morticians—and “there is little in the dynamics of the automobile accident industry that works for its reduction.”

Nader’s book popularized some harsh truths about cars and car companies that auto-safety advocates had known for some time. In 1956, at a series of Congressional hearings on traffic safety, doctors and other experts lamented the “wholesale slaughter” on American highways. (That year, nearly 40,000 people were killed in cars, and the number kept creeping upward.) Safety-conscious car buyers could seek out—and pay extra for—a Ford with seatbelts and a padded dashboard, but very few did: only 2 percent of Ford buyers took the $27 seatbelt option.

In *Unsafe at Any Speed*, Nader railed in particular against the Chevy Corvair, a sporty car with a swing axle and rear-mounted engine that was introduced in 1959. Nader argued that the car epitomized the triumph of “stylistic pornography over engineering integrity.” (Its swing axle made the back end unstable, he said, causing it to “tuck under during turns and skid or roll over much more frequently than other cars did.) As it turned out, a 1972 government study vindicated the Corvair, finding that it was just as safe as any other car (Nader called that study “rigged”) but the damage was done. The Corvair became an icon of dangerous, even deadly design, and the last one rolled off the assembly line in 1969.

Whether or not its particular examples were sound, *Unsafe at Any Speed* mobilized a mass movement, in which ordinary consumers banded together to demand safer cars and better laws. Today, seat belts, air bags, anti-lock brakes and other innovations are standard features in almost every new car.

Nader went on to advocate for a number of consumer causes and has run for president four times.

Largely due to the impact of *Unsafe at Any Speed*, in 1972, Congress created the Consumer Product Safety Commission to protect Americans against undue risks associated with consumer products. This agency now sets standards for more than 15,000 products, from toys to lawn mowers.

1. What was the name of Ralph Nader’s book? What law did it prompt to get passed?

2. How much extra did it cost to get seat belts in your car? How many Ford owners paid extra for them?

3. What car was Nader particularly against? When was the last one made?

4. Do you feel like the Consumer Product Safety Commission is a needed entity? Or do you feel like it is over regulating businesses? Explain.
The Impact and Consequences of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring

Before her book *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, Rachel Carson knew it would be controversial. Carson had written about how the reckless use of pesticides was contaminating the natural environment and slowly poisoning living things. She knew her claims would surprise "99 out of 100 people." Many people, especially those in the chemical industry, would undoubtedly feel threatened by her book. She knew these people would attack her and try to discredit her writing, but this did not stop her. Carson believed in her book. She wanted to let the public know the facts about pesticides and she hoped it would lead to stricter environmental laws.

Carson had no idea just how popular and influential her book would become. Soon after *Silent Spring* was published, even the president, John F. Kennedy, knew about it.

Carson was right about her critics. They spent hundreds of thousands of dollars attacking her personally and trying to discredit her claims. She was called "a bird lover--a cat lover--a fish lover, a priestess of nature..." as well as an hysterical woman and a poor scientist. Even before *Silent Spring* came out, an agricultural trade organization distributed counterarguments to Carson's main points.

Carson was prepared for this kind of criticism. Before her book was published, it had been reviewed by many scientists and experts. Carson knew her claims were scientifically sound. Other critics misrepresented her claims. One chemical company wrote their own book called *The Desolate Year.* It was the story of how terrible the world would be if pesticides didn't exist, even though Carson had never said that pesticides should be eliminated entirely. Carson believed that pesticides should be used appropriately by educated professionals. The criticisms did not stop *Silent Spring* from becoming a success. Carson's writing was so understandable and her topic so compelling that the book quickly became a best-seller.

Reading Carson's book changed many people's ideas about the environment and inspired some to take action. People wrote to their representatives in Congress and asked them to do something about the misuse of pesticides. When several senators created a committee to research environmental dangers, they asked Carson to speak to them about pesticides. Carson recommended that the government regulate and reduce pesticide use, and that it ban the most toxic pesticides. She said that a citizen of the United States had the right "to be secure in his own home against the intrusion of poisons applied by other persons."

President Kennedy understood the importance of Carson's book. He asked his Science Advisory Committee to research Carson's claims in *Silent Spring.* In 1963 the Committee released a report called "The Uses of Pesticides." It supported *Silent Spring.* Environmental activists continued to push the government to regulate pesticides. Changes in federal law in 1964 required companies to prove that something did not cause harm before they could sell it. In 1972, activists pushed for and won a ban on DDT, the pesticide that started Carson's research for *Silent Spring.* And in 1970 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created "in response to the growing public demand for cleaner water, air and land." Who knows what the world would be like today if Rachel Carson had not written *Silent Spring*?

1. What was the name of Carson's book? What was she called by her critics?
2. What was the Desolate Year? What was it about?
3. What was created in 1970 due to Silent Spring? What was banned in 1972?
4. Do you feel that the EPA is an organization that is beneficial to citizens or do you feel that the government is over-reaching their boundaries? Explain.