



## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Fragments of Romance**

Christina Riley

#### **Abstract**

Every few hours, the tide brings in treasure and takes it away, making the same beach new again, which I'm fairly certain is a large part of its appeal to me. It's dizzying to think of all the ways the sea can touch a person, to the point that when asked what it means to me, my mind goes blank. Rather than using words, it feels more appropriate to hand over a pebble that's been polished smooth by endless waves as if to say, *like this*. Or to show photograph after photograph of the ever-changing pattern of its surface. *Like this*.

Where do you begin with something that has no beginning and no end? There's barely enough time in one life to describe the colour of water, let alone what it holds.

#### **Biographical Note**

Christina Riley is an artist and writer based on the Ayrshire coast. Her essays have recently been published in *The Clearing*, *Caught by the River*, *Elsewhere*, and *Minding Nature*, and her book *The Beach Today*—a photographic diary documenting marine objects collected over three months of daily beach walks in spring 2020—was published by Guillemot Press in summer 2021. Riley was longlisted for the 2019 Nan Shepherd Prize for Nature Writing before later that year starting The Nature Library, a travelling library bringing books about nature and the environment to public spaces. She is currently exploring works inspired by marine science and underwater ecosystems as well as the role of storytelling in times of climate crisis (sometimes together, sometimes not).

1. There's a romantic notion to let the coast happen *to* you. It's a place where so many of us let out a sigh of relief; a passive acceptance, a collective letting go. That's understandable when we consider the senselessness of demanding anything *from* the ocean, or expect it to provide at our will. It is so unspeakably deep, so constant in motion, and so filled with

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complex life. It is utterly, magnificently vast. It's surely impossible for any of us to ever understand it fully, but we know by now that it's always worth trying.

2. Initially all you can do is stand and stare. At the shifting edge between land and sea, the breeze flows inland over the vast, open ocean and cools any skin left bare to it. With each elongated inhale, the air swirls down into the chest, becoming breath, tying the body back to its ocean ancestor. Loose sand tumbles back and forth, gathering up fragments of life beneath gigantic skies, skies of shifting colour cascading over the horizon, ever unpredictable and impermanent. On the beach, this push and pull between the vast and the minute is constant, making every glance inimitable. No one has ever looked at the coast the same way twice. To witness the way the sunlight flickers on a particular wave, at a particular time, from a particular angle is to hold a memory that is entirely yours. To pick up a stone or shell is to mark that walk with a significance it might not have held otherwise and cannot hold for another, since, even if that other person walked on that same beach, on that same day, perhaps their eyes were pulled by a fleeing oystercatcher, or by discarded aquamarine fishing rope, when yours were drawn down to this particular shell. This one of many. This one like no other.

3. To imagine the coast and to physically experience it can offer conflicting images. A romantic picture might conjure images of an idyllic oceanic expanse—miles and miles of marvellous white sands flicked by cresting waves, glassy green and blue and backlit by the sun, impossibly quiet but for the sound of their gentle crashing onto the shore with a champagne fizz. Or maybe it's a one-eighty view of open, glimmering ocean, the water so

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still it barely makes a sound; the plop of a gull landing in the shallows practically echoes in its announcement. I imagine bare feet sinking into soft, fine sand, like caster sugar melting in the warm shallows. Salt shakes from the air onto my lips and lashes. In these visions, I'm probably the only person to be seen.

4. But we are very rarely the only person on the beach. Here on the west coast of Scotland, the sand is probably cold, and if it's not wet, it's likely blowing into my eyes. What remains on the ground is decorated with discarded wrappers of varying sorts. The champagne turns to Tennent's; a can crushed into the foetal position on the strand line. But there is romance here. There are those first pangs of would-be love. The presentation and pursuit of desire, and the insatiable hunger to know everything about a person, or a place. Personally, it emerges from scenes of a much smaller nature. Looking down instead of out, beach objects in the sand begin to read like words on a page, fragments of stories ready to be pieced together. A page-turner, every step piques the interest and offers something new. Picking up an empty shell, its calcareous crevices tell tales of a creature who once scuttled along the seafloor. Its hollows hold traces of creatures—hermit crabs and barnacles, perhaps—who call it home today.
5. And there's that first pang.
6. There's also, I think, something about the edge of the sea that feels like I've gone as far as I can go. As an indecisive person, this brings a certain comfort; I enjoy the limit set by the tideline. There's comfort in the humbling scale of it, and in its ancient creatures who have

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seen so much more than we ever will ... am I romanticising now? It hasn't always been this way. Born on the east coast of the United States and growing up on Scotland's west coast, the Atlantic has always been physically central to my life, both coasts hugging its edges and me constantly hopping over from one side to the other. My relationship with this gigantic body of water has shifted over time, intensifying and fading; as a teenager I was less concerned about the colours of sea and sky as I was with the bottle of Malibu warming my body more than our meagre fire, or my best friend making me laugh while my crush kissed somebody else. But the sea was there, always. The land rolled into it and rolled back out, every day until eventually I looked at it again with intention, with care. "Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new," said Ursula K. Le Guin.



Fig. 1. Oyster shell. Each layer is a growth line offering information on the individual's growth rate, age, and nature of its home.

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7. My love for the coast has been built from fragments, forming through that innate desire we seem to have as human beings to pick things up off the beach; the glisten of sea glass or a shell's fractal swirl makes me drop to my knees. Unable to take the sea home with me, these objects act as souvenirs, shaping and solidifying fickle memories into something tactile, letting me hold on to them a little longer. Looking at these inanimate things back home and out of context—a rock, a shell, a cracked and sea tumbled vessel—immediately conjures up the place from which they came, or how they came to me. The unique colours and textures of a single stone can represent an entire beach. On my shelves, I see the Isle of Lewis in sharp pink and green granite. The rounded mauve stone with dusky peach spots sits snugly in the palm of my hand and takes me back to Arran. I see Golspie and Isle Martin, Dunbar and Knockvologan. Tiny portals transporting me to places I wished to stay a little longer. Over time, my shelves have become a scrapbook of sorts, building more and more layers of what has captured my heart and held it tightly.
  
8. As it turns out, this desire to collect, gather, and hold is one of many things not unique to human nature. In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson writes of the satin bowerbird, with its insatiable need to collect all manners of blue objects to decorate their dwelling, adorning it with anything that they believe might attract a mate. As long as it's blue. When Nelson writes, "When I see these blue bowers, I feel so much desire that I wonder if I might have been born into the wrong species" (27), I am plunged underwater, wondering why my species ever came to land.

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9. The sceptic in me asks if this desire to collect is just part of a learned need for material possession, or for valuing ownership of *things*. Or maybe it's the opposite. Maybe attributing value to that which is, in monetary terms, free, the idea of what deserves to be valued is challenged. It says that this stone, this shell, this beach, is worth something. Worth remembering and holding on to. And isn't that a kind of romance?



Fig. 2. Pirnmill, on the west coast of Arran.

10. Susan Stewart contemplates collecting in *On Longing*, referring to habitual “memory mark making” and suggesting that without this mark making, each “undifferentiated sea” becomes attributed to every place. One beach blends into another. A way to prevent this, Stewart says, is through the collection of souvenirs—miniature mementos of place. On the beach, these take the form of the shells and pebbles I can't help but bring home with me.

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Further to these physical souvenirs of stone and shell, Stewart also discusses the photograph as souvenir, describing the photograph as a modern day “logical extension” of the pressed flower; preserving a moment in time, crystallising as it dries. An entire day squeezed into twenty petals. With shells and pebbles, unpressable apart from against the fleshy palm, the photograph acts as the pressing. The green urchin a memory of the day when the tide was so low I could step out into the domain of the sea creatures, or the tiny cowrie taking me back to the day spent on my knees wondering how on earth something so small can be crafted with such impeccable detail. They feel like portraits, these photographs of shells. And aren't they? A portrait of a loved one, held around the neck as an amulet of a great love. A shell held in a pocket, another. There is a risk, as Stewart points out, always, in allowing memories to be “collected” in ways that substitute our immediate experience for a physical representation of it. The memory turns to stone. But if the alternative is, without having this hold on it, the memory eventually tumbling away from my mind altogether, then I will, for now, continue filling my shelves with those I don't want to lose.

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Fig. 3. Cowrie shell. Rarely found, but when it was, it often seemed to be with two to three others.

11. In *Bluets* (again, always), Nelson quotes Henry David Thoreau when he said, “When our companion fails us we transfer our love instantaneously to a worthy object.” (41)

12. What happens to our capacity to love when our companions don’t fail us, nor we them? What about the times when our companionship is taken from us unwillingly? Do we still, then, transfer our love to worthy objects as Thoreau believed?

13. In March 2020, the world fell into lockdown, and many people across the country found themselves without any access to green grass or clean air, let alone within reach of the sea. I was lucky—I had the beach on my doorstep offering almost seven miles of uninterrupted shoreline, and I promised myself not to take it for granted. Familiar as it was, that vast and



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ever-changing landscape made a newly shrunken world feel a little bit bigger. It felt such a remarkable gift that I felt in no way deserving of; in a period of contraction and banal repetition, I was able, every day, to visit somewhere new. I felt like I had found a secret portal, a cheat code to get me through the impossible task at hand.

14. As winter thawed, the beach shone with warm, golden hues. Even the walk across the road to the beach was lit by daffodils and dandelions, and my walk home was weighed down with pockets full of yellow, as if the beach itself was alighting with the arrival of spring. Except, the following day offered no yellow at all. I wondered where it all went, and how this small stretch of sand could look so different from one day to the next. Was I simply not looking out for yellow anymore? Or had it all been washed away, making room for blue? Every day these small marine objects would catch my eye, and every night I would arrange them on a sheet of printer paper next to a window and take a snapshot of it with my phone. What formed was a photographic diary that documented the days when I didn't have much to say. These walks and the curiosities found on them offered something to hold; real, tactile things at a time when everything felt not-quite-there. In my palm could be the shell of a being which had lived a life the antithesis of my own, or a stone which has been squeezed and carved and rolled by the earth beneath me for millennia, or a broken fragment of pottery once held in the palm of another. The whelk mocked my worries. Every periwinkle held up to the light, its pastel colours rolling between my fingers, told me that it has seen it all. Somehow, this careful looking brought a softening that was at the same time being protected by a hardened, more resilient shell. Or maybe I was just crawling up into one. The metaphor could go either way.

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15. Whatever was happening, I had fallen for this beach completely and looked forward to seeing what would appear each day. During my one hour outdoors, I could melt into another part of this world, eyes glazing over the shore until something pulled them back into focus as if awoken from a dream. Instead of looking for and picking out my favourite objects—of which several had quickly been acquired—it was more fun (and maybe just as importantly, required less brain power) to listen to what the beach had to say, engaging in a conversation with a place when so many other connections had been shut off. Each day it would offer a new colour palette; rarely the one I was expecting or hoping for. There were days of patterns, and of translucence. There were days when everything was tiny—even the smallest shells had miniature versions of themselves, and sifting through a few square feet of sand, an entire hour could be lost in an instant. On one of these days around a month into lockdown, I was kneeling by one of these concentrated patches of minuscule treasures, scanning for the unmistakable form of a cowrie shell, when I overheard two people talking to each other on their own daily walk, one remarking to the other as they passed me that “things have gotten so bad, we’ve gone back to using sea shells as currency.”



Fig. 4. The Beach Today, May 12, 2020.

16. Perhaps during times when physical connections were beyond our reach, when fear and worry were underlying every thought, any moment of delight felt even more unreliable and impermanent, and so the desire to hold on to what brought us pleasure grew stronger. Maybe that's why simply picking up these mark makers wasn't enough. They needed to become a photograph, too. Locking in the memory and holding it tightly.

17. The coast toys with the senses. Some days it is striking in its stillness and silence. On others, the wind tears away the sound of the gulls and crashing waves. Around midsummer, my usually beloved seaweed made me gag as it rotted in the stagnant heat. When the tide

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is especially low, I could walk far out onto the intertidal rock pools and feel the barnacles jag into the soles of my feet or, while kneeling to stare at a hermit crab, deep into my knees. The pain rose almost imperceptibly until suddenly it was searing, but the crab was surely about to move again ... so, just bear it a little bit longer. Back on the sand, even before they were picked up, some pebbles gleamed like sea glass, calling out to be rolled around in the palm. Like the tiny patch of tiny shells, there was a particular spot to find perfectly polished pebbles. (How they were all carried to the same area is a mystery to me, but it did make for a very pleasant place to sit.) Rolling these pebbles in the palm of my hand and squeezing the cool stone on a hot day, the beach came to inhabit more of my body, increasing my physical sensitivity to a shifting landscape which always, with every visit, without fail, provides something new to feel. To sit down, staring at the sea, holding something that feels like comfort in the palm of my hand felt like a significant way to spend my time. These days spent feeling the beach so acutely made it appear all the fuller, with heightened senses and a quieter mind. Each one adding a layer which compressed and solidified the love which already lingered from the past, for this coast and for others which are a part of my life. Like a stone being made and remade by the sea. It matters how we experience the coast. It matters what we take away from it in our minds, in our hands and in our pockets. It matters that we tread lightly but feel fully.



Fig. 5. The Beach Today, June 4, 2020.

18. In those early days of lockdown, words felt off-kilter or unneeded. Everyone knew what was happening and that we were experiencing difficult, “strange” times. “Unprecedented.” It was everywhere, every moment of every day; to speak or write of it further felt like adding to a narrative no one wanted to be a part of. Why add to the noise when it could all be said with a look—a knowing nod or a careful curl of a smile to a passing neighbour on the beach.

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19. Emptying my pockets at home, I'd shuffle them around on the floor in some kind of flat lay, and inevitably, a pattern would form. Instinctively finding symmetry in the swirls, or tilting a whelk or periwinkle to spill light into its concave. Empty shells, stilled lives. Gathered together, they seemed to spell out whatever it was I didn't have the energy or comprehension to say with words. The all-encompassing sea begs for a physical, three-dimensional experience, something I had the privilege of feeling every single day. Yet some of the most intimate moments of this beach diary occurred on social media. Each night, I posted a photograph of the day's arrangement to Twitter. For no particular reason other than it was the most accessible and simplest outlet (and I suppose I needed an outlet). But I worried that the speed of social media would somehow wash the romance away from such tactile artefacts, trivialising an intimate moment by squeezing it into a chaotic and two-dimensional one. The tenacity of Twitter didn't feel in sync with my experience on the shore. These objects lured me in by the way they caught the light, by their smooth surface or the way the colours shifted as they turned in my hand. Twitter didn't feel like a place to express love, be it for a person or a place. But in those early days of lockdown, Twitter became an intensely sensitised realm. Our emotions had nowhere else to go. And as it turned out, I gained as much joy, beauty, and perhaps most importantly in spring 2020, human connection, online as I did by the sea.

20. Eventually, these daily tweets formed a book, *The Beach Today*. A scrapbook of sorts, or a diary, attempting to tell the story of the coast at a time when words failed. Both are a means of saying, "Wow. Would you look at this?" But how can a person describe every contour of a shell, or the soft chalk that transfers onto salt dried and cracked skin when you

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roll it between your fingertips? I can try to describe the shell of an urchin, but right now, all I can do is show you.

21. It makes me think about who gets to tell what story, and maybe words fail me when the subject is of the underwater realm. What can I say about the whelk, or the kelp? Of the life it leads, how it feels or where it's been? If we write what we know, then there's nothing I can contribute when it comes to the unknowable sea. It's a personal lesson in what needs to be said and what's best left unsaid, and in imparting stories onto a place that isn't my domain. Anything I write about the sea can only come from the perspective of land, and never will I be able to write truthfully about the way an octopus sees the purple coralline algae it knows how to camouflage itself against despite being unable to see colour itself. Or can it? How on earth can we ever know? How could I ever write about an octopus other than to tell you how it makes me feel to live on earth at the same time as that octopus, which is to say, to tell you that the octopus feels miraculous?

22. It's important to know how to love what we don't—what we might never—understand.

23. We thought we understood whales enough to execute such horrors onto them. We thought fish were inexhaustible. One of the (many) difficulties of the pandemic has been grasping the idea of doing nothing as a means of doing something. What's the difference between walking a mile on a beach, or taking that same time to sit down on it? Not moving an inch but exploring each shell within your arm's reach? What would be gained by doing less? Would it, in fact, be more? What *is* "less" and "more," anyway?

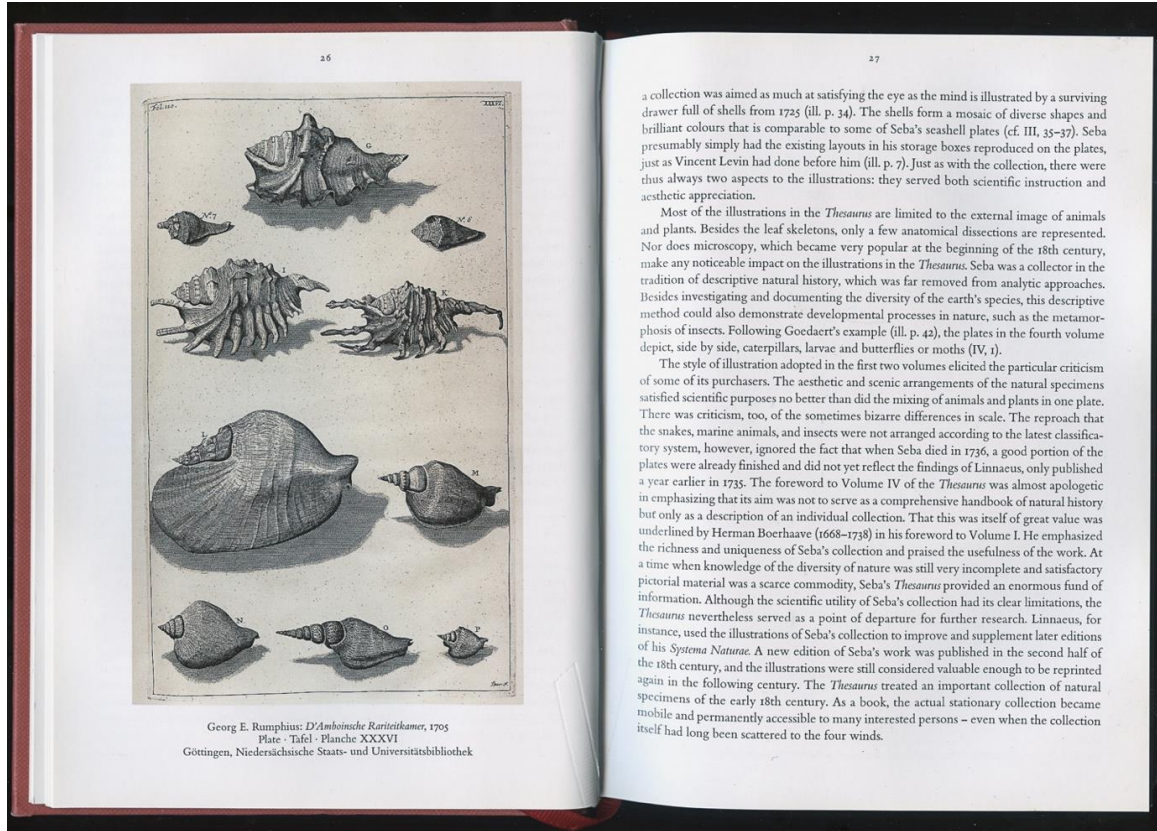


Fig. 6. Albertus Seba, *Cabinet of Natural Curiosities*.

24. In *More About Wild Nature*, Eliza Brightwen sums up at least one reason why we attempt to share a place, whether it's through language, photographs, or collecting objects, contemplating this innate desire we have to show others the beauty we've witnessed ourselves:

*How hopeless a task we have set ourselves. We stand and gaze at the gorgeous sight, but how are words to tell of the lovely tones of orange, pink and crimson, in delicate streaks and flecks on a pale blue, or it may be almost sea-green sky (for a stormy sunset will sometimes suggest that colour). I am not going to attempt the task, but I would*



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*say, try to do it, if only for the increased power of appreciation of all succeeding sunsets which will be the sure result of even the feeblest attempt at word-painting. The friend will be able to conjure up from your description not perhaps the sunset you saw, but something bright and beautiful that will bring refreshment to a mind possibly very wearied with the monotony of everyday life. Sweeter still will be to her the thought that, whilst nature was giving you such exquisite pleasure, you received only that you might bestow, you took thought and pains that she might be the sharer of your joy.*

I first read this in 2019. Now, following all these last few years has brought, the desire to collect and share stories with each other has risen. To say “I want you to see this” for no other reason than that you believe it will bring a little bit of pleasure or joy. With these objects, communication came not from the sharing of “word-paintings” but of objects which sparked the same desire as a sunset or mountain vista. There is a commitment made when you choose a place (or perhaps it chose you), and to collect moments and memories from it. To look at a beach with slow and meticulous wonder is to see it for everything that it is: tangled weed and wires, periwinkles and plastic, sea and smashed glass. Not all of our seaside experiences are pleasurable, and perhaps the more we get to know a place, the more we see loss over abundance. But it’s in the face of loss we need to be looking, collecting, and sharing that which we love.



Fig. 7. The Nature Library at Civic House, October 2019.

25. The physical beach is not always within our grasp. In *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling*, Erica Fretwell writes, “Literature is a sensitising mechanism, not merely a representation but an amplification of experience.” I would add that to read isn’t to escape, but to enter. It is not to distract, but to focus. Some of my most evocative and all-encompassing reading experiences have been ones which took me underwater, when previously I had only ever skimmed the surface. Writers like Sy Montgomery, Lotte Hass, Sabrina Imbler, and Ellen Meloy opened my eyes to parts of this earth I’d never seen, their words lush and flowing, incomparable to even the streams and rivers which pour over dry earth. The clarity of these underwater habitats quench a thirst I didn’t know I had, and with only a matter of words I can be taken into the deep ocean,

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submerged in crystalline turquoise waters filled with a kaleidoscope of life, watching an octopus emerge among the coral as if by magic.

26. There is so much romance—by which I mean love, by which I mean care—in these words that my chest feels it could burst reading them. Letters from Rachel Carson to Dorothy Freeman have made me pause to catch my breath. The romance Carson felt for the ocean was one filled with awe and wonder, the way we might look at a person who continues to surprise us. She recognised that nature isn't something to be owned or shaped to our liking but to be respected for all that it already is, as itself and for itself. Carson, and in turn her words, are filled with the desire to explain the unexplainable, to marvel at the things which the human mind can barely process, as if to say, I don't yet know what this is, or how to describe it, but I know that it matters, and that I want you to feel the way I do right now. Do you feel it?
27. The US Bureau of Fisheries might not immediately come to mind as a well of desire, but it was here in the middle of the twentieth century where Rachel Carson was garnering a new kind of Romanticism. Her unwavering need to see and feel the world more deeply came in response to growing industrialisation, consumerism, and materialism witnessed in the wider Western society of which she was a part. She resisted the haste and disregard for common sense she was seeing, where rash decisions were being made, affecting entire populations of both land and sea while no one seemed to be spending much time figuring out if the ideas were actually good ones. If only these people could see what's happening underwater, they might make a different decision. This was Carson's belief. This was why

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she would kneel at the edges of rock pools or wade into the shallows and write to her loved ones, and to the public, about the wonders to be found there. Because she knew that they mattered, and she knew that making them matter to more people, mattered. Carson used language to take readers to the edge of and beneath the waves, allowing them to embody an oceanic world and fill themselves with her unquenchable love for the sea. And while her communication with the public was written with meticulous care, in private, her passion for the ocean flowed fully and without restraint, just as an ocean should. It's this passion and desire which is necessary to do the work that she did. You need to feel deeply that a life without these things which simultaneously give you life and take your breath away would be unbearable. In a letter to Dorothy Freeman, Carson wrote:

*I think the things you might have enjoyed most (as I believe I did) were these. The first day, when the tide was only "0.0" and so not as exciting as the later ones promised to be, I was poking around a big rock that had thick crusts of coralline algae that looked as though they could be broken off. I found they could be—because the pink coating was covering some very large barnacles, or rather barnacle shells, for they were empty. So I took a small mass of the stuff to the house, and spent the evening being entertained by all the creatures that were living in and on that little world that wasn't more than two inches across in any direction. Among other things, there were tiny anemones living inside the empty barnacle shells. And on the outside of the shells there was attached a whole new generation of baby barnacles. When they fed (as they did, madly, all the time I was watching) I could see that the inside of their shells, and their*

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*own little feathery appendages, were for some reason coloured the same deep pink as the algae that were cementing their world together.*

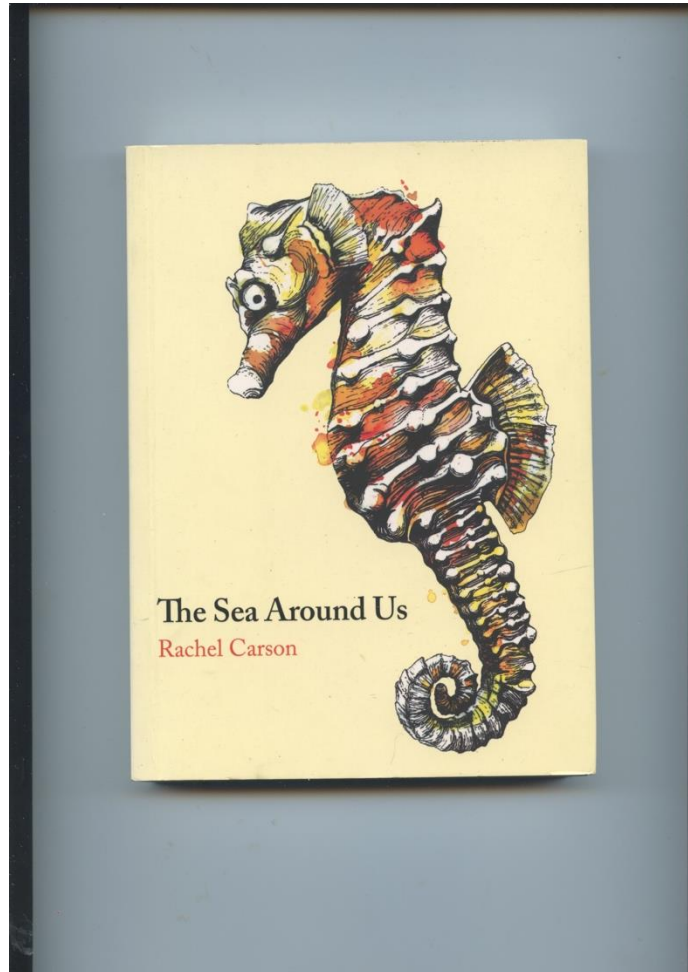


Fig. 8. Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (Unicorn Publishing Group, 2014).

Looking at the ocean acutely—microscopically, at times—was central to Carson’s all-encompassing love for it. How might looking at something as seemingly small as a rock pool affect the way we look at the vast ocean? A place where creatures live on the edge, a microcosm of messengers between land and sea, saturated with life and activity beyond our imagination. We can’t fathom the hostility of such a place when watching periwinkles scooch over barnacled stone, crawling over each other clumsily at, well, at a snail’s pace.

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But they face the power of the ocean twice a day, every single day. They are drowned and dried and thrown out of their homes. Yet look into these pools, and it is silent. Motionless, but for the quick dash of something the human eye was too slow to catch. To stare at this space is to be taken into the story of another, to become invested in creatures who have absolutely no concern for you. You're spending time with them not because you have to, not because they have something to offer you, but simply because it's there, and so are you, sharing the same earth at the same time, doing utterly, absurdly different things. Can the act of looking closely broaden our sight as well as sharpen it? If Carson's legacy is anything to go by, the collection of a shell, or a small crust of coralline algae, creates a ripple effect toward greater care for the world. It is to see beyond our own reflection. To look into the sea, not at it.

28. Here in Ayrshire, there's a particular rock pool I love, which is less of a rock pool and more of a puddle, filling a shallow recess in a large rock right at the edge of the water. It's home to some of the most flamboyant limpets of Troon. The bottom of the pool is slick with pale purplish pink coralline algae and fringed with branching coral weed, lilac with white frosted tips. The limpets glisten with bright green algae, illuminated by the inch or so of crystal-clear seawater which fills with light even on cloudy days. These pools, so still and strange and slow, fill me with a fizzing urgency. They can capture my attention for hours. I want to photograph every corner of it, reading each square inch like a page of a book, taking this pocket of sea home with me. I think I'm done, then the light changes. It illuminates one algae-stained barnacle among the lilac crusted stone. For goodness' sake.



Fig. 9. Sea urchin shell.

29. The sea is always *out there*. It is, in every sense, beyond us. It's easy in that case to romanticise it, not being able to see what we don't particularly want to. It's often cited—by myself included—that the ocean suffers from being “out of sight, out of mind,” but I wonder if this also gets tangled in an absence making the heart grow fonder. We don't have to see or deal with the real challenges that we would face were we to really be *out there*, or to see with our own eyes the damage that absent minds have done. It encases the planet in a cloak of invisibility, lost in the vastness.

30. An uncluttered, pristine beach of the kind we picture on wall paintings and screensavers no longer exists. The sea bears visibly the impact of humans and it is impossible to walk upon a beach without the eye being caught by garish nylon fishing rope, knotted up in the

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seaweed like a necklace at the bottom of a jewellery box. Tiny plastic nodules worm their way deeper into the sand. Warped cuts of vinyl flooring from sometime last century. Discarded buckets and spades from last weekend. A pearlescent balloon string, gleaming pink and aquamarine in the light as if it was formed inside the shell of an oyster. It catches the light like the iridescent swirl of a top shell snail whose outer layer has been scratched away by who knows what over who knows how long. If I were to idealise this beach, I would ignore the strewn rubbish, the bulldozing of “nuisance” seaweed, and the signs from the council telling beachgoers not to feed gulls because “bird poo pollutes the water.” I would talk endlessly about nacre and how it lights up this dishevelled shore. It’s everywhere. Mussels and top shells look like fallen stars among the blackish sands, and I cannot believe all of this beauty just lying there, somehow ignored in a world which insists on commodifying worth.

31. “If there is poetry in my book about the sea, it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out the poetry,” said Carson. To share the beauty of the ocean is to share the ocean. But when beauty is the only element shared, romance becomes romanticised. Even from a short distance, a beach might mirror those romantic paintings of endless shores rolling seamlessly into the sea and out to a still horizon, uncluttered by the everyday realities that we see when we step onto the beach today. But would a painter thread orange and turquoise fishing rope through the tangle of seaweed? Would they add flecks of light in the sand, the glinting of broken bottles? Would they only paint birds in the sky, or would they include the bodies washed up ashore? How does one paint a sea which has been overfished, polluted, and filled with noise? It’s humans



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who imparted romance, desire, and violence to a place which is so vast that perhaps for a time, we genuinely believed that our actions would have no effect. We see now that they do, and that it's our own actions again which will restore our relationship to a place we are only beginning to understand. An object from the sea can tell us its story if we look closely and listen, and it might even show us where we fit among that story. If we continue to collect, gather, and share these objects with each other—a shell, a pebble, a book—isn't that a kind of romance?

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