

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

By Elisabeth Tova Bailey. 190 pp, \$18.95. ISBN: 978-1-56512-606-0. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill; 2010.

Until struck with a serious illness, most of us don't realize how suddenly and swiftly our everyday lives can change. Physicians who encounter patients with illnesses that are debilitating or difficult to diagnose need creative healing options. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, by Elisabeth Tova Bailey, offers an odd pet—the common woodland snail—as an effective coping tool for patients. Ms Bailey, a writer of essays and short stories, relates how her experiences in observing a snail's behavior led to insights into her life and helped her deal with serious illness.

Ms Bailey describes how, when she was 34 years old, she developed fever, headache, faintness, and weakness while on a trip in Europe. Physicians were unable to diagnose her health problem, and life-threatening complications developed until an experimental medication temporarily stabilized her condition. However, Ms Bailey soon became bedridden after she suffered a series of relapses in which “all functions not consciously directed, including heart rate, blood pressure, and digestion, had gone haywire.”

A friend brought Ms Bailey a pot of wild violets containing a snail that the friend had found outside. Because the author's mobility was limited to her bedroom, she found diversion in the uninformed observations of the snail, which had been taken from its natural environment. The serendipitous gift of a snail from the wild became an opportunity for close observation of another living being. In her observations, the author found a metaphor for changed life, and she became inspired by the snail's adaptation to the confined spaces of the flowerpot. She felt that she shared her own sense of loss and displacement with that of the snail, thinking, “I wasn't alone.” She also began to wonder, “What kind of a life does a snail lead?”

One morning, Ms Bailey discovered a small square hole under the return address of an envelope that was propped up next to the flowerpot on her nightstand. She realized that the snail was nocturnal, left the pot, and ate the paper. On postcards she sent to friends, she drew arrows pointing to snail-chewed holes and wrote, “Eaten by my snail.” (I didn't know snails could eat paper!) She began feeding the snail mushrooms and other vegetation. As she lay in bed at night with heightened senses, she heard the snail eating and found comfort in the sound: “The tiny intimate sound of the snail's eating gave me a distinct feeling of companionship and shared space.”

As Ms Bailey cared for the snail, it buffered her sense of usefulness. Perhaps the following comment by the author can serve as the premise of the book: “Survival often depends on a specific focus: a relationship, a belief, or a hope balanced on the edge of possibility.” However, I'm not sure the book really has a premise. I see the book more as a gift—containing a mixture of art and science—to be interpreted by each reader. The first few chapters offer many wonderful examples of the author's observations and insights.

The book takes a scientific turn when Ms Bailey finds a 12-volume compendium titled *The Mollusa*. In the pages of these volumes, she learns all about snails, including their anatomy, chemistry, intelligence, dispersal, reproduction, dormancy, and defenses. Her uninformed observations now became enhanced with scientific information.

In the remaining chapters, Ms Bailey uses poetry, historical references (such as the work of 18th-century writer and physician Oliver Goldsmith), and modern science to introduce the reader to just about everything you would want to know about snails. The author relates much fascinating information. For example, in Mandarin Chinese, the words for *humble abode* literally mean *snail's house*. The mathematical law of “the spire of the logarithm” dictates the beautiful shape of the snail's shell. A snail can locate calcium by its sense of

smell. The snail produces and moves about in slime, and the author explores “the macromolecular architecture of molluscan mucus.” She shares many lessons from nature about survival at the margins and yearly renewal, such as how the snail defends itself by withdrawing into its shell when faced with danger. Quotes and haiku at the start of chapters add elements of simple wisdom.

The book's final lesson comes when the author reports that watching the snail began to take patience as her health improved. When she gained back her mobility, her former world beckoned. Although the snail's life captured her interest when she was ill, in her health, the wider world drew her away from the snail's pace. Eventually, the snail was released back into its natural habitat, and the author moved on with her own life.

Over the course of nearly 2 decades of the author's illness, she was diagnosed as having a variety of diseases. She indicates that she was eventually diagnosed with acquired mitochondrial disease, though she also raises the possibility of tick-borne encephalitis. The evidence presented in the book suggests that she contracted a viral infection that altered her immune system, leading to autonomic dysfunction. Whatever her correct diagnosis, her doctors were puzzled by her condition and had little to offer in the way of effective treatment. A “humble, brown snail” had a major effect on this patient's life and is the real healer in this book. With time, the health of Ms Bailey, a curious patient full of grace, improved.

Physicians who are interested in how patients experience illness will find this book to be a well-written and informative account of one woman's perspective. Perhaps the text will also trigger healers and patients alike to consider alternative means of coping with illness.

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