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Book Reviews Summer 2011

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating, Elisabeth Tova Bailey, 2010, 190 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover), Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. Available online and through local booksellers.

This lovely little book takes a very small thing — a snail munching a leaf — and gracefully weaves it into a meditation on illness, strength, perseverance and biology. Bailey wrote the book during a relapse of a mitochondrial disease that sapped her vitality and left her so weak she couldn't sit upright for more than a few minutes. Worse, she was an insomniac, her thoughts flying furiously and helplessly within her head.

"When the body is rendered useless," she writes, "the mind still runs like a bloodhound along well worn trails of neurons."

Knowing Bailey's love of nature, a friend gives her a woodland snail whose pace perfectly matches her own. Lying on her side, watching the snail on her bedside table for hours, Bailey finds "my often frantic and frustrated thoughts would gradually settle down to match its calm, smooth pace ... the snail was the quintessential tai chi master."

Who would have guessed that snails could be so fascinating? Bailey is inspired to study up on her new roommate and shares the details — about snail slime (a chemical wonder), snail love habits (they're a lusty bunch), snail shells and feet, even snail intellect — in prose so gentle that reading it soothes the mind.

The snail — which she never names — was "the best of companions," Bailey writes. "I had watched it adapt to changed circumstances and persevere ... leading me through a dark time into a world beyond that of my own species ... [I]ts tiny existence had sustained me." She concludes with the essential wisdom she's gained: "Lots to do at whatever pace I can go."

Bailey lived out that philosophy in the writing of the book, which she called "sheer torture" due to the effects of her mitochondrial disease. She struggled against a mental fuzziness that made it hard to find words and if she sat at her computer longer than 15 minutes, her blood pressure dropped. "I would write at night because otherwise it would ruin the day," she says. "It took me four years to finish — it was a very slow process."

Her hard work paid off. The book has received numerous honors including the 2011 John Burroughs Medal Award for Distinguished Natural History and the American Library Association's Top 10 Adult Science and Technology Books for 2010.