

Literature & Medicine: From the Inside Out

Interview with Elisabeth Tova Bailey :: bio, by Elizabeth Sinclair :: bio

I recently had the privilege of speaking with Elisabeth Tova Bailey, author of *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, a quiet and powerful book taking the medical world by storm. Excerpts of the book are forthcoming in *Academic Medicine* and *Hektoen International*, and reviews have already appeared in the *Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, *The Bellevue Literary Review* and the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*.

While Elisabeth was bedridden with a serious autoimmune illness, a woodland snail living in a pot of flowers at her bedside provided her with both companionship and a connection to the larger world. The book is based on the year that the snail shared with her, one of nearly twenty years that she has lived with her condition.

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

Lizz Sinclair: *Elisabeth, thank you for agreeing to speak with me about your book. First, would you please give a little background on how you came to write it?*

Elisabeth Tova Bailey: During the year that I observed my bedside snail companion, I was much too sick to do anything—I was just focused on surviving. Had I been able to write, it would not have been about my illness, which was far too overwhelming. A few years earlier, I had written some short stories, so if anything, I would have wanted to escape back into fiction writing.

When I was doing a little bit better, I put together some basic notes, just for a few friends who adopted some of the snail's offspring. I described how to care for a snail and included some of my observations of its daily life. I wasn't writing for publication and I thought that was all there was to say. The experience had been so unusual and so personal that it didn't seem like something I'd want to make public. After all how much could one say about a snail and how could I possibly explain that my life had been saved by a gastropod weighing less than half an ounce and smaller than a half inch in width? But my interspecies relationship kept haunting me in a good way, and I wanted to write a biographical thank you to the snail.

I started with the notes and my memories. Living with the snail at my side for so long, I became familiar with its likes and dislikes, had observed how it moved and what it did, until its life had become part of my own and any memory of that year involved both of us. I also began to read the scientific malacology literature¹. When I came across a sentence in which a scientist's love for, or obsession with, gastropods overcame scientific distance, I pounced. Slowly I accumulated 10,000 words of natural history. As I wove this material into the narrative I found myself contemplating the differences and similarities between a snail and a human, and this allowed me to take the story deeper. Halfway through the writing process, searching for a good quote on the love life of a snail, I discovered the work of the Victorian naturalists. Their lyrical snail observations were just what was needed to round out my own observations.

Only after I finished writing the book, did I realize that I had incorporated into my nonfiction many elements found in fiction writing. I had plot, characters, character development, relationships, a sense of place, unexpected happenings, and mysteries. I am now fascinated by the limitless possibilities of creative nonfiction.

Sinclair: *Of course, the book is also about your experience of illness.*

As patients, we struggle to make sense of a life that is changed beyond our control. The very things that bring meaning and pleasure are often lost as a result of illness. One has to find new reasons to live, new ways to connect to the world. I hope the book helps other patients find these connections, in particular the connection to the natural world. It doesn't matter how small or tenuous that connection is, but it has to be there.

I hope the book helps

Bailey: Though I didn't want to write too directly about illness, it was the backdrop for the book and I wanted to touch on the losses and isolation that can occur. Everyone experiences illness, even if it's just the flu, and everyone can experience isolation even within a marriage, family, or friendship, as we are all, ultimately, individual beings. So in that way I was able to make my story part of a more common experience.

Sinclair: There is little mention of your healthcare providers, friends and family in the book, even though you wrote that they were important both in providing a link to the outside world and in your care. Why was this?

Bailey: Patients who are homebound are often alone a lot of the time. Family members may be away during the day at jobs or a patient may live alone. Although caregivers and friends may stop in, they have their own busy lives to get back to. However, the snail was always there, right at my side. So the book simply reflects the reality of my situation at the time. I didn't want the reader to be distracted by brief visitors, I wanted the reader to experience how deeply isolating illness can be. Then, from that place of isolation, I could draw them into the snail's world, just as I had been drawn in.

Many people have helped me through the years, but the lives of caregivers, friends, and family members change. People move, take new jobs, have kids, go back to school, retire, care for others, and travel. As thankful as one is for that essential help along the way, one ultimately still goes through the illness experience alone. Patients rarely get credit for what they manage to live with day in and day out. I wanted to create a sense of that burden so a reader begins to understand the incredible courage it takes to live each day.

Sinclair: In several places you mention that your illness separated you from your previous life, and even from the friends who visited you. Would you talk a little about that?

Bailey: When a healthy person becomes injured or develops a chronic condition, their life separates into two distinct time periods, the life before and the life after. As time passes, the pre-illness life dims. At first I still had hope of recovery, because I could remember what health felt like, but after a decade had passed that memory faded. I can no longer even imagine the "feeling" of health. Our culture is geared toward success and making it in the world—the American Dream. Illness does not fit into that dream. So at times one feels closer to other patients—even if they are strangers, even if all you know about them is their illness—than to one's healthy friends and family.

Illness is a world without words, a world of sensation or, sometimes, the lack thereof. How can you explain your individual physical experience, which can impact all facets of life and which may change day to day, even moment to moment? It's nearly impossible. Patients often write to tell me how grateful they are that I've managed to capture in words some of the experiences they've had, but could never describe.

Sinclair: What do you hope readers will think more about after reading your book?

Bailey: As patients, we struggle to make sense of a life that is changed beyond our control. The very things that bring meaning and pleasure are often lost as a result of illness. One has to find new reasons to live, new ways to connect to the world. I hope the book helps other patients find these connections, in particular the connection to the natural world. It doesn't matter how small or tenuous that connection is, but it has to be there.

I hope the book helps caregivers understand that someone can be weak in body, yet remain a complete person—still in need of social contact, creative stimulation, intellectual challenges, and ways to participate in life. The quality of a patient's environment and thoughtful palliative care are critical.

It's also critical that caregiver-patient relationships and medical professional-patient relationships be mutually respectful. Patients know a lot about their illnesses—they understand their illnesses, literally, from the inside out. Ironically, the people who help, treat, and care for them have usually never experienced such an illness themselves.

Perhaps *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* offers a perspective that could be of help to the aging population in

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nursing homes, where ties to society, and life itself, are fragile.

It would mean a great deal to me if the book increases compassion for patients with chronic illnesses and especially for those with less well-understood diagnoses. I would like to see the book find a home in medical college and pre-med curricula where it can stimulate discussions on palliative care, patient environment, the isolation of illness, and the meaning of life.

Sinclair: What are you working at the moment?

Bailey: On any given day, my “window” of activity is small and unpredictable. I am trying to keep up with interviews and Q&A’s like this one, and I did manage to complete the first of what I hope will be several essays for the medical humanities field. “A Green World Deep in Winter: The Bedside Terrarium” appeared this winter in the free access *Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*. The essay recounts Dr. Ward’s invention of the terrarium in the 19th century and his historic use of these small ecosystems in palliative care.

Sinclair: The book has been very well received by both the medical and the naturalist communities.

Bailey: I am delighted that *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* is reaching all sectors of the medical world. It is being read by researchers, physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, social workers, hospice workers, patients and caregivers. One reader is designing a curriculum based on the book for use with autistic adults, while another reader e-mailed to say that sections from the chapter on snail slime were read aloud by researchers at an MIT lab that studies non-Newtonian fluids.

I’ve been delighted that the book bridged the gender gap early on with a “Books for Dudes” review in *Library Journal* which was followed by a *MORE Magazine* review. Also, given that the story takes place inside a terrarium, within a bedroom, and my illness precludes exercise, it was poignant when the book won two national natural history awards, awards given to an author who is usually a physically robust, outdoors person.

Just as snails, despite their small size, managed to colonize the world, it is lovely that my small book about such a small creature is now gliding around the world too, with editions available in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and translations in the works for China, South Korea and Germany.

Sinclair: I have to ask you one more question—could you really hear the snail eating?

Bailey: My room was very quiet and so yes, I could really hear the snail eating. This would not have been possible had there been any background noise such as the hum of a computer or refrigerator. I am often asked if I can demonstrate the sound, but as a human with only 32 teeth I can’t recreate the sound made by a snail with 2,640 teeth. However, for anyone who would like to hear the minuscule munching of a snail, there is an audiorecording on my website.

Sinclair: Thank you very much, Elisabeth.

¹Malacology is a branch of zoology dealing with mollusks.

Hear *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, watch a slideshow about the book narrated by Elisabeth Tova Bailey, and read other interviews with her: www.elisabethtova.com

You can also read her recent essay, “A Green World Deep in Winter: The Bedside Terrarium,” on the invention of the terrarium by a 19th century London physician and its use in palliative care, in *Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*.

Elisabeth Tova Bailey, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, South Carolina, 2010). 178 pp. | ISBN 978-1-56512-606-0

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Sinclair.

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