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Book Review

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

By Elisabeth Tova Bailey

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010

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This delightful, small book provides an enthralling and true account of a woman confined to her bed for long years by a mysterious neurological disorder during which “*days slipped silently past...leaving no memory, no trace at all.*” Thanks to a friend who brings the woman a terra-cotta flowerpot of violets and a snail, she finds a near substitute for the activity she can no longer enjoy by watching the prowess and progress of that small, brown snail. One may think of Tony Judt’s compelling essays in his last year of life, or of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, but really it is the legend of the Scottish king, Robert the Bruce, gaining new will by watching the spider in his cave that came to my mind.

There is definite beauty, wonder, and fascination that Elisabeth Bailey finds in watching her companion, the snail. I read her account in one sitting, transfixed by her observations, the old melody *All Things Bright and Beautiful* coming to life. *Transfiguration* is not too strong a word to characterize her captivation by that small creature.

Of her devotion to the snail, she asks, “*Was this truly a door that I would someday open and walk through...?*” Her story provides the answer. Elisabeth Bailey is the hero of her book, however poetically peripatetic the little brown snail. Her snail moves from flowerpot to terrarium, and with it the author moves from simple fascination with her snail to fields far away. From study of its conjugal habits, its mucus and slime, and the wondrous potential of snail glue, she turns to reading widely, from Darwin to Durrell, and much more. Bailey transcends her physical limitations to let the reader grow in knowledge.

Would it be disrespectful, unscientific even, to wonder whether --or how-- her delight in the activity of that little mollusk somehow provided a curing metaphor, a panacea lifting her beyond and above her physical limits to a far wider life of the spirit?

Devotees of “evidenced-based” medicine may ponder the messages implicit in this short masterpiece. It provides a portrait of courage that will inspire all of us, physicians and patients alike. And the rest of you, too!

“Read it!” I say.

About the Author



- Howard Spiro, emeritus professor of medicine at the Yale Medical School and founding director of the Program for Humanities in Medicine there, established the gastrointestinal section at the school in 1955. For a long time, he was the single author of a textbook, *Clinical Gastroenterology*. He is coeditor of *Empathy and the Practice of Medicine*,

Facing Death, and *Doctors Afield*, and *When Doctors Get Sick*. His apologia pro vita mea is *The Power of Hope*, all published by the Yale University Press.

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