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Book review contributed by Charles Sturm

***The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* by Elisabeth
Tova Bailey (2010)**

Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill, NC. 191 pp. ISBN: 978-156512-606-0. \$18.95

It is uncommon for me to find a book that combines two of my passions: medicine and malacology. When I do, it is usually a book on malacology that was written by a physician, often in the 17th or 18th century. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* by Elisabeth Tova Bailey was a pleasant surprise. The book is compact, only 191 pages; however, within those pages is quite a bit of snail lore and some medicine as well.

The author was afflicted by a rather mysterious neuromuscular disorder which completely altered her life. From an active woman she became a bedridden invalid. While her body was afflicted by this malady, her spirit continued on. What this neuromuscular disorder was is never completely explained. Was it a virus? Was it an autoimmune disease? A mitochondrial disease? While late in the book there is some speculation, the final diagnosis is never revealed. Actually, it appears that Bailey's doctors never arrived at a final diagnosis. While this malady piqued my interest, it is actually a subplot in this story. The two main story lines are Bailey's attempt to continue living as full a life as possible and her relationship with a snail.

The snail was introduced with a plant that she received from a friend. This snail became a focus of much of Bailey's interest. It became a diversion for her and in this diversion she was drawn out into the world to learn about her snail in particular and malacology in general. Bailey observes her snail. She notes its comings and goings. She notes how it interacts with its world. Along with these observations are ones on how she is interacting with her world as well. To understand her snail, Bailey starts reading the scientific literature regarding snails and mollusks and begins to correspond with several biologists who specialized in snail biology and ecology. Thus, we in turn learn quite a bit about snail biology and ecology in these pages. Thankfully, instead of the dry, technical writing one finds in a scientific tome, Bailey brings this information to life. She infuses these observations with a liveliness that I wish would find its way into the scientific and medical literature.

Bailey kept the snail for a year. During this time she comments on the snail's interactions with its world and her interactions with the snail. As the year drew to a close, she returned home and had a friend return the snail to a suitable wild habitat. I felt a tinge of melancholy when the snail was released. While the snail was to gain its freedom, I was to read no more of Bailey's observations of the snail and her musing upon them and her life in general.

This book is a testament to one woman's determination to overcome her illness. It is a wonderful, lively, and engaging introduction into the natural history of a snail. It is a compelling work that one will not regret picking up and reading.