

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

by Elizabeth Tova Bailey, illustrations by Kathy Bray, 2010, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, NC, 191 pages, price approx. \$18.95, ISBN: 978-156512-606-0


This small book (less than 200 pages double-spaced and only 5.5 x 7.5 inches) is truly a gem. It has an inner sparkle and brilliance that make it worthy of giving to a close friend, even if that friend is not interested in sea shells, land snails, or conchology. I would have thought that most readers of this magazine would not find themselves learning new secrets about land snails by reading this book, but a collector friend to whom I lent the book remarked that she had not realized land snails could have such complex living habits. There is some interesting natural history of land snails presented here, but this is not why you should read this book. The reason to read this book is stated in a quote on the front cover of the book from a review by the renowned Edward O. Wilson, who states, "Beautiful!" When a renowned biologist, researcher, lecturer, theorist, and author (two Pulitzer Prizes), like E.O. Wilson makes such a statement, anything I add would seem to be rather superfluous, but for those who might want a bit more detail, please read on.

"The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating" is a true story about the author's experiences dealing with a debilitating chronic illness that struck rapidly and unexpectedly and in a short period of time confined her to bed, hardly able to move. A friend brought her a small potted plant with a brown land snail (you don't learn the species until the end of the book) that had taken up residence in the pot. Instead of detailing her battle with, what was for the most part an unknown and undoubtedly terrifying disease, Elizabeth Bailey provides the reader with in-depth observations of the life of this snail over the course of a year. A professional malacologist friend noted that her science is "spot on." We are allowed to follow the author on a journey of discovery, made intimate because of her condition. A condition that is only a blurred background in the book, gradually brought into focus by the narrative about the snail's life and activities, and the author's rather detailed study into the biology and natural history of land snails.

Elizabeth Bailey fought her illness for two decades before finally beating it. The exact cause of the illness was never established, though various pathogens were suggested by various medical authorities. Her snail observations occupied one year of this time period, but her continued research involved several years. Because of this, she is able to provide quotes and paraphrasing from authors as varied as Edgar Allen Poe and T. H. Huxley, or Charles Darwin and Emily Dickenson, or Robert Cowie and Richard Dawkins. These authors (with the exception of Robert Cowie, a

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malacologist at the University of Hawaii) are certainly not where most of us would turn for information on land snails, but you may be surprised. Understandably, the selected bibliography included is eclectic. Perhaps my favorite quote is, "Every single species of the animal kingdom challenges us with all...the mysteries of life." (Karl Von Frisch, 1962, "A Biologist Remembers," translated from the original German by L. Gombrich, Oxford, 1967) This certainly fits this book where the reader is gracefully brought to an intimate examination of the mystery of life as evidenced by a small land snail as well as the larger personage of the author.

This book is a warm and rich celebration of life - all available in an afternoon's reading. Of the many ways to spend a couple of hours in the afternoon or evening, I cannot think of many more pleasant and rewarding than Elizabeth Bailey's book. You will find yourself smiling often and finish with a feeling of satisfaction. Oh, and as for the identity of the snail, I am afraid you will have to read the book.

Thomas E. Eichhorst
thomas@nerite.com