

Book Review

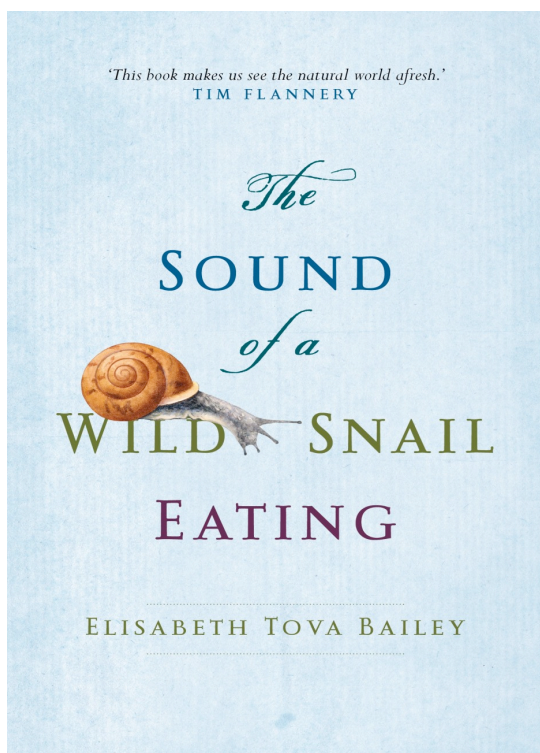
Bruce Livett



The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

by Elisabeth Tova Bailey. Illustrations by Kathy Bray, Paperback edition February 2011, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, Australia ISBN: 978-1-921758-12-6 (pbk.). RRP: AU\$22.95/NZ\$30.00

Where to start? This little book of 184 pages I digested at one sitting. I couldn't put it down. From the opening quote of Florence Nightingale that "A small pet is often an excellent companion" to the farewell cameo from "Snails and Their Houses", 1888 about love-making among snails (sorry, but



you will have to read the book yourself to find what was said there) the narrative held me spellbound. I thought I knew a good deal about snails, but this little book opened my eyes to a whole new world of discovery about terrestrial snail behaviour.

This is a true story. The author, Elisabeth Tova Bailey, was confined to bed with a debilitating and fluctuating chronic illness that she has fought for over two decades. During one year of this time she became intrigued with the behaviour of a snail that had taken up residence in a small potted plant that a friend had brought her as a present and which was placed next to her bed. Her fascination in the snail's

midnight wanderings and reactions to small morsels of different foods introduced into its environment makes for fascinating reading. We are taken on a journey of discovery that includes observations of a hole that appeared overnight in an envelope she had propped against the base of a lamp. How could a hole – a *square* hole – appear in an envelope overnight? Then she thought about the nocturnal activity of her snail and reasoned that it must have some kind of teeth, "and it wasn't shy about using them". Intrigued to learn more, she offered the snail some real food, some withered blossoms, and stayed awake over several evenings making observations with her torch. In this way she introduces the reader to what we as malacologists know as the radulae. But she goes further with her observations, further than most of us have gone. She listened carefully and could *hear* it eating! "The tiny, intimate sound of the snail's eating gave me a distinct feeling of companionship and shared space....The snail and I were both living in altered landscapes not of our choosing; I figured that we shared a sense of loss and displacement....After weeks of round-the-clock companionship, there was no doubt about the relationship: the snail and I were officially cohabiting..Whereas the energy of my human visitors wore me out, the snail inspired me". Wanting the snail to have a safer and more natural home she later moved it from the flowerpot into a fresh terrarium where it thrived on portobello mushrooms and hatched its offspring. And so we learn about snail courtship and spiral mating, its sophisticated method of scent tracking, "the macromolecular architecture of molluscan mucus", telescopic tentacles, snail shell spiral asymmetry, and more. Eventually, all the snails were returned to their native habitat. Elisabeth Bailey made her snail observations for over a year but continued her research for several more years as is evidenced by the valuable list of Selected Sources (books and articles for further reading) provided at the end of the book.

I would venture to say that few of us have heard the sound of a wild snail eating. Now you can. The author has a web site <http://www.elisabethtovabailey.net/index.htm> where she has posted a 4 min 30sec YouTube video that allows you to view and listen to the *sound* of a snail eating!

I recommend you buy two copies of this little book; one to read yourself and one to pass on to someone who does not even LIKE snails. You will both find you want to learn more about these fascinating creatures