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

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2010.

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How astonishing that in a quiet room a perceptive patient could hear a wild snail heating dried flower petals. Not a surprise once I read that Aristotle had observed that snails have teeth and that Bailey's woodland snail has 2,640 and some of its kin may have up to 10,000 teeth! Elisabeth Tova Bailey, who has suffered from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, has written a most beautiful and life affirming book about her accidental companion whom she introduces to the reader on the first page.

In early spring, a friend went for a walk in the woods and, glancing down at the path, saw a snail. Picking it up, she held it gingerly in the palm of her hand and carried it back toward the studio where I was convalescing. She noticed some field violets on the edge of the lawn. Finding a trowel, she dug a few up, then planted them in a terra-cotta pot and placed the snail beneath their leaves.

The author describes with remarkable economy the long and disappoint- in course of her illness, her hopes for experimental therapy, and the cruel reality when later, "My doctors said the illness was behind me, and I wanted to believe them. I was ecstatic to have most of my life back. But out of the blue came a series of insidious relapses, and once again, I was bedridden." p5 She then continues with a series of vivid descriptions of her experience of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, something worth reading by any physician who has ever doubted the sanity of patients with this complaint. The author writes that her "snail observations are from a single year of my nearly two decades of illness . . . While I was snail watching, there was so much I did not know about my small company- ion, and there was just as much I did not know about my illness. I was curious about my snail's species, and solving that puzzle would take several attempts and the help of a few experts. Even more challenging was the mystery of the pathogen that had forever changed the course of my life, and I would track down the likely culprit. There was also the unknown future—my own, and that of all living things." p163-64

But this rewarding book is not just about illness; rather it is about life as the author is gradually drawn to observing her new wild companion. "When I woke during the night, I would listen intently. Sometimes the silence was complete, but at other times I could hear the com- forting sound of the snail's miniscule munching." p17 Having arranged for a terrarium to house her snail companion and added first flower petals and then mushrooms to its diet (snails are hermaphrodites), the author despite her disability embarks on a thorough study of snails, ordering through inter-library loan the twelve-volume compendium *The Mollusca*, which covers the entire phylum of creatures without backbones that include the gastropods—snails and slugs—and the cephalopods—including the octopus.

She goes on to read everything that she can find on mollusks from Aristotle to Charles Darwin, including novelists and poets who have written about snails. Her bibliography is astonishing. It should not be forgotten that Darwin had studied mollusks, a study that had contributed to his great insight on evolution. It is also paradoxical that Darwin suffered from some form of chronic fatigue that began after his return from his seminal

voyage on *The Beagle*. It has been suggested that he had fibromyalgia or had acquired Chagas Disease in Chile from observing a bug as it bit him, and that most of his research and writing was despite recurring bouts of illness. Quoting Darwin in the *Descent of Man* in 1871:

Mr. Lonsdale . . . informs me that he placed a pair of land-snails . . . one of which was weakly, into a small and ill-provided garden. After a short time the strong and healthy individual disappeared, and was traced by its track of slime over a wall into an adjoining well-stocked garden. Mr. Lonsdale concluded that it had deserted its sickly mate; but, after an absence of twenty-four hours, it returned, and apparently communicated the result of its successful exploration, for both then started along the same track and disappeared over the wall. pp98-99

This is a very special book that reminded me of the early writing of Rachel Carson. Richly packed with human experience, scientific information, clinical observation and poetic insight this book will bring joy, understanding, and considerable scholarship to any reader.

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