



Audio essayist: Elisabeth Tova Bailey

Title: A snail kept her alive

Duration: 6 minutes, 22 seconds

About this transcript

Each Bookpod transcript is an edited version of a longer conversation recorded in person or over the phone. It is not a formal essay. To gain a better appreciation of the text, below, please listen to the podcast episode.

Introduction

If Dian Fossey was the zoologist of mountain gorillas, perhaps Elisabeth Tova Bailey may be the zoologist of snails.

In this Skype-to-landline episode of Bookpod, Bailey talks about the circumstances that led to her writing *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, a meditation on the ingesting, sleeping and reproductive habits of one particular gastropod.

Presentation

One year of my life when I was very bed-ridden, there was a snail that ended up living next to me about a foot away from the bed. A friend had picked the snail up on a trail



in the woods and put the snail in a pot of violets and brought it into my bedroom.

The snail came out of its shell a few hours later, and I was kind of disconcerted because I didn't know what to do with it. I actually couldn't do anything with it. I couldn't just return it, and I felt responsible for this little life. And I kind of figured it would vanish during the night and in the morning it would just be gone.

When I woke up in the morning, the snail was still there and it went back to sleep in the flowerpot because they're nocturnal. And over the next few days, the snail created this little encampment next to my bed, sleeping in the flowerpot by day and exploring the area around it by night.

And I just watched the snail then for successive days and became quite attached to it and, in fact, ended up watching it for about a year. And it really sustained me through a very, very difficult year of my illness.



I'm sure that it was a little mystified because normally in the wild, it would rain heavily and then mushrooms would grow and it would have a bountiful feeding situation, whereas in this case, a piece of mushroom was being put in the terrarium and it would suddenly appear without the rainstorm. That must have been very unusual. It must have thought it was living in a magical land.

And I also kind of wondered if it had any sense of me there just as some life form that was very large that was a few feet away. Snails do not hear and they almost don't see, so it's really a matter of smell and taste and vibration or touch.

I'm quite certain it would have been aware of some level of vibration if I moved in the bed, and I'm sure it was very aware of the different odors in my room of which I would have been part, which would all have been unnatural smells for it, not something it would have found in the woods.



I was out of my normal element and having to adapt to a really difficult situation and the snail also was out of its usual native habitat and having to adapt. And so I kind of also bonded in that way with the fact that there were two of us living not exactly how we would have wanted to be living.

#

A snail prefers food that it likes and that tastes good, and it prefers a soft place to sleep, as opposed to one that's too sandy. And I think, rather than anthropomorphizing, I kind of reverse that by just feeling like every creature on earth knows what, given two choices, will know which circumstance is more comfortable for it, humans included.

That's why I got so fond of it. It really let me know what it preferred.

The snail had been spending the days asleep in the violet pot. And we put a little more soil in the pot because it



just didn't seem like it had quite enough, and the snail refused to sleep in the new soil, which was sandy and had come from the garden. Instead, it would climb up on top of the plant and sleep in the crown.

And when that soil was removed and much softer, woodsy soil was put back in the plant, the snail again began to sleep in that softer soil where it would be beneath a leaf, which it preferred because it was darker and damper.

So that was how I learned that the snail did not like sandy soil. It made its preferences quite clear.

#

I think the idea that a snail could make a sound while it eats always surprises people. It certainly surprised me. I heard it one night when I had had a lot of insomnia, a very secondary piece to my illness. But because of that, that's one of the ways I got to know the snail early on, was that I was lying awake in the dark and I heard this tiny sound I



didn't remember hearing before after the snail had moved in, so to speak.

And it took me a while before I actually could believe that it was the snail making that sound, and indeed the snail was eating some flower petals. And I could hear it and I was completely astonished. It was such a tiny sound that, I mean, it's hard to imagine a sound being tiny, but it was just a tiny, tiny sound.

#

The experience of being a patient with a chronic illness and being bed-ridden is very isolating. You really are cut off from society. And in fact, if I had not been so cut off because of illness, and so slowed down that I actually moved more slowly than a snail, I would not have been able to enter the snail's world.

That interspecies bond really kept me going because there was a point at which the medical world was not able to help me much, and, you know, you're not able to participate in



life and you need something to connect with, and that snail happened to be what it was that I could connect with that year.

I still live with the illness I had, and it is a rollercoaster.

Valedictory

You can learn more about Elisabeth Tova Bailey and her fine book by visiting www.elisabethtova.bailey.net.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.