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MONDAY, AUGUST 8, 2011

Mara Purl: Soap Opera Actress, Screenwriter, Author, and Blog Guest



I have a special guest on my blog today - **Mara Purl**, actress, screenwriter, journalist, and author. Because many of you are not only readers but writers, I thought it would be fascinating to find out about her latest endeavor and to get a chance to peek into Mara's career. So, let me tell you a little bit about her before we start our chat. Here are some of the highlights:

Mara Purl is the award-winning author of The Milford-Haven Novels, which, collectively, have won fifteen literary awards. Mara's novels are based on her successful radio drama *Milford-Haven, U.S.A.*, the first environmental radio soap opera, and the only American radio soap ever licensed and broadcast by the BBC, where the show reached an audience of 4.5 million listeners throughout the U.K.

Along with producing sixty episodes of her BBC show, Mara also produces and performs audio books. She won the silver Benjamin Franklin and the gold USA Book News Audio Fiction awards for performing the first two of her own novels. And most recently, she was awarded the San Francisco Book Festival Gold Audio Fiction award for her performance of *Spa Deadly* and *X's* by Louise Gaylord.

Purl is also the co-author, with Erin Gray, of *Act Right: a Manual for the On-Camera Actor*. It's also an award-winner, and the authors are working on its second revised edition.

ABOUT ME



Kathy Holmes

Adventures of a California Disney beach girl, technical writer/editor

/e-publisher turned novelist, and the author of *Real Women Wear Red*, *The Tom Jones Club*, and *Viva Las Vegas (A Shaker of Margaritas: Hot Flash Mommas)*

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MY WEB SITE

See [KathyHolmes.Net](#) for more information about me and my books.

FAVORITE TWEET

Mara's screen-writing includes *The Meridian Factor*, cowritten with Verne Nobles, 150 radio plays, scripts for *Guiding Light*, and a television adaptation of *Milford-Haven* cowritten with Katherine Shirek Doughtie.

As a journalist, Mara's writing credits include two cover stories for *Rolling Stone*, staff writing with the *Financial Times* (of London), and an Associated Press assignment to cover the Apollo Soyuz mission, where she was the youngest reporter ever to win the NASA pool position in *Mission Control*. She is a member of the Authors Guild and of the Writers Guild West.

As an actress, Mara's regular role on the TV soap opera *Days Of Our Lives* opened the door for her to create her own soap. Mara was awarded the 2003 Peak Award for performing her one-woman play (co-written with Sydney Swire) *Mary Shelley - In Her Own Words*.

Kathy: Welcome, Mara. Wow, what an interesting and impressive career. Mara, can you tell us how you got started writing and acting in soap operas?

Mara: Both the writing and the acting started very early. At about 3, I thought the hearth in front of the fireplace was a stage, so I did a show every night for my parents. I thought everyone did! I started actually writing stories down on pages over the next couple of years, and I remember doing illustrations and getting help from Mom "binding" my first book (with red yarn) when I was about 5. I actually believe if we look back to what we loved to do somewhere between the ages of 7 and 10, we'll likely find a core passion in life.

Specifically, two things led to the job on "Days Of Our Lives." The first was that I was cast at age 9 in an ongoing TV drama in Tokyo, where I grew up. So I was very familiar with memorizing lines and working on camera. The second was that much later, when I was working as an actress in L.A., my manager sent me in to meet the casting director of "Days" on what's called a "General Interview." At the time I knew nothing about soaps, and actually thought soap opera was an inferior form of entertainment. Wrong! I was impressed with the very wise, posh casting director, for starters. The interview went well and by the time I was walking back into my apartment the phone was ringing with a job offer. I took it in about ten seconds. From day one, it was an intriguing job. I worked with great people, and learned a whole new form of story telling.

Kathy: How did the idea for a radio drama begin?

Mara: Again, there were two instigating factors. One was working on "Days," because I got intrigued with the long form of story telling. In a film, things are wrapped up in two hours or so. It's a valid form, but a very tight structure. In soaps, the structure is ongoing, and though it's much more difficult to sustain, it allows for a complexity and for revealing a series of choices and consequences. The other inspiration for my own soap was an invitation from a lovely gentleman who owned a radio station. I spent a summer performing in a two-character play in the town of Cambria, California. This man and his wife came backstage to compliment me and my co-star, and he said, "If you ever want to do something for radio, let me know!" A few months later I called and asked whether he'd be interested in

broadcasting a radio soap opera, and he loved the idea. So I began writing scripts and sending them to him. Eventually I found my cast (many from other soaps), found a studio home, and began producing episodes. That's how my show "Milford-Haven" was born. And after it was a success in a few American markets, it was picked up by the BBC, where it went on to find 4.5 million listeners throughout the U.K.

Kathy: What inspired you to turn the radio drama into novels?

Mara: While the show was on the air in London, listeners began calling in asking whether there were books that told an expanded version of the Milford-Haven story. Secretly, I'd always wanted to write novels, and felt this was my destiny. So when these questions began to arise I felt excited and ready to give it a try.

Kathy: I see the soap opera influence in *What the Heart Knows*, because it's written like a soap opera. There are multiple characters with their own points of view. Can you tell us the importance of point of view in telling the story?

Mara: You're right, since the whole Milford-Haven story began as a soap opera, the inherent structure of multiple characters with their own storylines is built in to the book series as well. Though *What the Heart Knows* is a book that stands on its own, it also introduces the whole series. I think a reader could imagine herself driving up or down the coast, finding the sign for Milford-Haven, and turning off Highway 1 onto Main Street. She'll be struck by a lot of things all at once—shops full of arts and crafts, pine trees, ocean air, and several people, not just one or two.

With multiple major characters, the story has to work from each of their perspectives. Who is Miranda? What's her story? She's an artist, a painter, who found Milford-Haven a few months earlier and moved here. She was already enjoying some success with her paintings in a fine San Francisco gallery, yet she's chosen to move to this little town? Why? What was her heart telling her that her head didn't know? What will she find here?

While Miranda is on her own journey, meanwhile Sally owns the local breakfast-lunch eatery. What does her life look like? She moved here all the way from Arkansas, and now she's a successful business owner. But what about her relationship with Jack Sawyer—a relationship he refuses to acknowledge publicly? How does she feel about that? What about her own dreams of expanding her business, and one day having a family? How long can she keep that dream on hold?

So while Sally's filling coffee cups and dreaming her private dreams, Miranda comes into her restaurant. They're friends and happy to see each other. But then in walks Samantha, a woman Sally cannot stand, and the feeling's mutual! So Samantha sits down to have a private talk with her pal Miranda, but Sally stands there eavesdropping.

Take just that moment—here are *three* distinct points of view, and each one of them is valid. Sally is entitled to her opinion about Sam, whom she considers to be "full of herself." But Samantha has just received shocking news and is trying to process it with the help of a good friend. Meanwhile, Miranda is torn because she cares for both these women.

DEBUT NOVEL



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Point-Of-View—of POV as we say in the film/television business—is tremendously important and endlessly fascinating to me. At any given moment in life, there is always more than one way to look at a moment, or an issue. The more altitude we can get on a situation, the more clarity we can achieve. So I'm often writing about *how* a character can move beyond "self", move beyond their own tiny, narrow POV and see a bigger picture.

Kathy: What was it like working on a soap opera? It all sounds so exciting to people not in the business.

Mara: It was a privilege, a blast, and a lot of work! I absolutely loved it. In fact, I learned so much from doing the soap that my best friend Erin Gray and I wrote a book together called *Act Right: A Manual for the On-Camera Actor*. Our book became a best-seller in the acting-book world. It's full of hilarious stories, as well as good solid information. We tattled on ourselves, on all the stupid mistakes we made while learning the ropes.

So here's a day-in-the-life of a "Days" actor.

4:00 am wake-up call. Work out, get centered, review today's script, drive to the studio.

6:00 be on the set ready to begin work. (This may sound like it's early, but remember the entire crew will have already been there working for 2 hours!) First run-through of the day begins promptly, and for this run-through actors wear no make-up, no costume, and we carry our scripts. This is the *only* rehearsal that's just for the actors. The director gives us our blocking (that is, tells us where we'll be moving in each scene.) We make notes in our scripts, but mostly we instantly memorize these movements as there isn't much time for review. For me personally, I often watched the scenes I wasn't actually in, so as to get a sense of the whole day's story and tone.

9:00 Camera Blocking run-through. This time, we can still carry our scripts if we need them. We actors run through the script while the director and the DP (Director of Photography) work out where the cameras will be moving. Imagine this as a complex ballet, a dance of both people, and of heavy, valuable equipment, all moving much of the time. The Director will have spent hours and even days visualizing each of these moves. Will we see Actor A over the shoulder of Actor B? Will this be a close-up? Will we zoom in to see a particular reaction? (For a much more detailed description of this, please read Erin's and my book!)

2:00 Dress Rehearsal. Actors are due on set with their make-up and costumes on. That means that some between the end of Camera Blocking and Dress Rehearsal, we've found time to visit the make-up chair and consulted with the wardrobe team in case we have any questions. The make-up chairs get full! So it's important to talk to the make-up artists and schedule a time to get "done." Make-up, Hair and Wardrobe crew members are true artists whose work is vitally important on soap operas, as we're all expected to look glamorous—except when we've been beaten up, imprisoned, or kidnaped, and then we have to let these artists do their disaster-look wizardry! During the Dress Rehearsal, no scripts are allowed. This is the actor's only chance to fine-tune special moments, hit our marks (literally), create the emotion needed for the scene.

4:00 Taping. This time, the cameras roll and there is NO stopping, NO

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going back. Unlike working in a feature film, where there can be multiple “takes” of a scene, a soap opera is taped just exactly as if it were being broadcast “live.” We generally finished at 6:00 or 7:00 pm, so it was about a 12-hour work day. Then you have to go home, study the script for the following day, and get lots of sleep! Dark circles can’t always be covered by make-up.

Kathy: I know that having lived in Southern California, Northern California with relatives in the Central Valley, you've captured California as a character well. How did you come to know it so well?

Mara: Actually I don’t know the Central Valley, nor do I have any relatives there. But the Central Coast has been my soul’s home for over twenty years. From my first summer there performing in the play, I just felt I’d come home, and knew this would always be a very special place for me. Why I now know it so well is because I wanted to know *why* I felt so strongly about it, and decided to *learn* everything I could about it. It’s a region with a rich history and a special quality, and I love sharing it with my readers.

Actually my love for the Central Coast began in childhood. My dad’s best friend was a professor at the UCSB (University of California, Santa Barbara). The families would visit and have a wonderful time there, sailing, hiking, exploring the town. Once when I was about 12 we were there for a visit, and the moon woke me up in the middle of the night. This full golden orb hung over the ocean and glinted across the mountains. I thought right then, “this is where I want to live.”

And my love for California extends all the way up and down the coast and up into the mountains too. I adore San Francisco! It’s like a magical city in the clouds. And I love L.A.! It’s a big sprawl filled with highly creative people imagining what’s next for our world. One favorite spot is the Angeles Crest National Forest just above Los Angeles. (It’s featured in one of my short stories, *Angel On a Rope*.) I was up in the “Crest” skiing one winter. As I sat on the lift chair I could look right to see the Mojave Desert, and look left to see the Pacific Ocean. Where else can yo do that?

Kathy: The story also reveals the contrast between small-town life and big city life. But even in a small-town, glamour is still an element. Tell us about the illusion of glamour or if you believe there is something real to glamour.

Mara:

Kathy: How many installments will be in this series and when will they be available?

Mara: There will be twelve books in the Milford-Haven Novels series, and they’ll be published about every 8 months . . . so you know I’ll be busy!

Kathy: Tell us about the theme of the book and some of the issues the characters are dealing with and what led you to writing it?

Mara: The theme of the book is the *heart*—are we listening to it? Does it have anything valuable to tell us? Can it offer important guidance? I believe that in our busy world we honor mostly the *head*—that is, logic and

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“smarts”. We *need* our level-headedness for a hundreds, thousands of things in our lives. We need our heads to stay on track and handle our responsibilities, to strategize and plan. But if we listen only to our heads, are we missing anything valuable? The “heart” is often dismissed as being the repository either of “mere feelings” or of fear. If we make decisions based on what “feels good,” we’re told we’re not smart; and if we avoid something because we’re “afraid” of it, we’re told we’re immature. So how about looking much deeper into the truly valid and important aspects of the *heart* such as intuition?

Readers can have a very interesting journey of their own by tracking each character’s “heart” journey. Is Miranda listening to her heart? (She’s just beginning to take it seriously. How does that alter her course?) Is Jack listening to his heart? (No, he’s stuffing down his feelings as though he were driving spikes into packed earth.) What about Chris Christian, the journalist who gets in trouble at the very beginning of the story?

Readers can enjoy a first read of *What the Heart Knows* by just having fun moving through the story and its interconnected plot lines. But they might also enjoy digging deeper into the lives of the characters . . . and perhaps into their own lives too.

Kathy: Anything else you'd like to tell the audience?

Mara: That I truly welcome them to Milford-Haven and hope this is the beginning of a long, fulfilling journey together!

Wrap-Up:

Link to Blog Tour:

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