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MARA PURL ON THE POWER OF PLACE IN FICTION

My friend [Alyson](#) introduced me to [Mara Purl](#)'s work and I was thrilled to see that she not only writes fiction, she is also an actress and created her own radio show.

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Instead of following traditional wisdom to choose one discipline and master it, Mara figured out how to enjoy her creative life as a hyphenate – a writer-actor-radio show producer.

Mara has created Milford-Haven where her character artist Miranda Jones, tries to make her way in a new town, juggling her career, romance and local politics.

I interviewed Mara as part of her [blog tour](#), focusing on the role of setting in a novel. Setting places a large role in my own book, and I was curious about Mara's choices.

What was the first glimmer you had of your fictional town, Milford-Haven?

The first hint was a series of invitations from a good friend, an astronomer, who grew up in the town of Cambria, California, which is on the Central Coast—an area I'd never seen. It sounded lovely, but I never seemed to have time to get there. Then there was another hint, an invitation to play the lead in a play called "Sea Marks." I accepted the part, and guess where the production was going to be staged? In Cambria! I pay attention to that kind of synergy.



Author Mara Purl

I began reading the local paper, befriending local people, and observing how people related. Of course, people are people the world over. Yet in this little town, the consequences of actions happened sooner, the relationships had an immediacy. This was a town of artists and artisans, mixed with entrepreneurs, farmers and ranchers.

The next plot twist or instigating factor was a visit from a local couple who came backstage to compliment my co-star and me on our performance. They owned the local radio station, and left me with an invitation. "If you ever want to do a performance on our radio station, just let me know!"

I was hired to play "Darla Cook" on "Days Of Our Lives." I watched the scenes I wasn't in, interested in the long-form of story telling that is the structure of a serial drama.

I mused about writing a story in that structure, and suddenly that idea connected with the invitation from Wally. I began to think about creating my own serial drama about a small town.

It seemed a perfect microcosm for story-telling, where it would be plausible that the core group of characters knew each other and could interact regularly.

Once the idea gelled in my mind, I called Wally to see what he thought. He loved the idea, and that's all I needed before writing the first several scripts.

If Milford-Haven is based on a real place, what changes did you make to fictionalize it? How did you choose the name for the town?

Since Milford-Haven is based on Cambria, I looked for a geographical or historical resonance in choosing a name for my fictional town. Cambria is the classical Latin name for Wales, adapted from the native Cymru.

I began looking at a map of Wales, which, like California, has a jagged westward-facing coastline. While I was reviewing towns on the Welsh coast, the name that resonated was that of a small town called Milford Haven.

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During this same time frame I happened audition for Shakespeare's "Cymbeline." In the play, my character received a letter from her beloved that said, "Meet me in Cambria, in Milford Haven." I knew that was *it*.



California near Cambria

is a fictional one that is free to float on a background of reality. Why? Because while non-fiction is about facts, fiction is about truth.

If I try to place my characters in an actual town as their home base, then I'm stuck—and they're stuck—with the facts. Oddly enough, by fictionalizing the details of my town, I can more effectively tell the truth of my characters.

What about the town makes it perfect for your stories to unfold? For instance, why must your stories be here and not in a different kind of setting?

My story is set both in space and in time. The time period is the late 1990s, when there a great surge of energy leading up the millennium. The stock market was booming, there was no national debt, there was a tremendous sense of hope. There was a kind of urgency about embarking on your lifetime goals before the century ended, a desire to be on track as the new century began.

This was the beginning of a very deep trend that's now becoming more universally evident—a trend away from logic, tactics, and strategies, and toward intuition, instinct, and synergy. Or a trend away from the head and toward the heart. This is the theme throughout my novel series, and placing it in the late 90s is necessary, because it places the story at the epicenter of this global shift.

Geographically, I feel this is a uniquely Californian story. California is both the end of the continent, and the beginning of the Pacific Rim. It's a state that straddles two seismic plates, the North American and the Pacific. Standing on the edge of the Central Coast, you ride the continental cusp.

California is famously the most experimental, forward looking of all the states. It's farthest from our European roots, the ultimate experiment in "manifest destiny."

There's a sense among we Californians that whatever is going to happen is going to happen to us first, that we may be slightly crazy, but that we're also courageous, that you can only live in California if you're ready to challenge yourself.

I believe this story has to occur in this particular region and in the town of Milford-Haven for a number of reasons. A town of artists and entrepreneurs all following their hearts and creating new paradigms for their lives becomes a nexus for transformation that radiates outward. Events in this little town may seem isolated, but ultimately impact a wider sphere.

There is something unique about Milford-Haven. It's an eclectic mix of sophistication and simplicity, of business savvy and unbridled creativity. And there is an aesthetic of beauty that almost makes the heart ache, a magnetic pull of soul, spirit and love.

The description of the town on your web site is enticing. I love how you associate the kind of person with the town – a town for escapees and dreamers, a place where people can come and actualize themselves. How much do you think place affects our ability to create?

Thanks for the compliment about the description! That's a distillation of many years of writing and pondering this story. And yes, your words—actualizing themselves—are so accurate.

What I did not change—and therefore requires careful research so as to be accurate—are the natural features like the topography of the Central Coast, which plants grow and in what seasons, the wildlife in the region, the general sense of population and industry, traffic and tourism, local customs and speech patterns.

If I didn't write about these features accurately, I'd not only lose the respect of Central Coast residents and tourists who visit the area, but my story would lose the authenticity that makes it resonate.

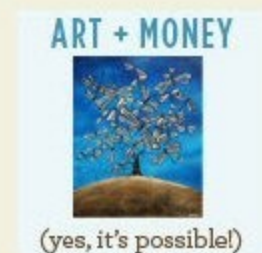
As to changes I did make in creating my fictional town, they're extensive. I find it's quite important to make sure my actual town

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As to *place* affecting our ability to create, I think it's vital, though I would say "place" can have levels of meaning. Virginia Wolfe asked the question, "What would a woman do if she had a room of her own?"

Time and again, I've seen almost magical transformation in the lives of women who carve out a space for themselves: a room, an attic . . . one friend even converted a closet into a small office.

In each case, it was like planting a bulb in fertile ground. Soon something beautiful began to grow in each of their lives: a career in healing arts, a successful business, a talent for drawing.

So the first thing that's important is just a space dedicated to possibility, a space set aside in respect for a person's creativity.

Sometimes we're blessed in life and find a physical location that truly makes our hearts open and our souls feel at home. But when we don't have access to places we love, we can always cultivate an inner sense of place, a "resort" to a higher place inside ourselves where we can feel a connection to peace, and to power.

What helps you really get into your setting while writing?

On a daily basis, I spend some quiet time thinking about my town and my characters. These reflective times often inspire me to do research on some particulars, which might be tracing a route on a map, looking up the history of a piece of property, studying the details of a lighthouse, or any other myriad details. These details always draw me back into the story.

Sometimes I listen to music that I associate with Milford-Haven—I have a special playlist to which I add pieces from time to time when they really speak to me.

But for me there's no substitute for spending time in the Central Coast, from Ventura to Santa Barbara to Morro Bay to Cambria. I plan several visits a year, and have my favorite spots where I stay, eat, write, walk, and muse.

What details do you find yourself going to again and again to evoke your town's vibe? And how do you challenge yourself to come up with new details?

The sky and the ocean look different each day on the Central Coast, and a description of each orients the reader as we progress through the span of days covered in each novel.

Since I'm writing about the west coast, that means a lot of sunsets over the water. So I've turned this into a signature recurrence. And each sunset I describe must be different from all the rest. One day I was in Cambria, and I went to a favorite spot to write about the sunset.

But every metaphor I thought of was one I'd used before. I was determined not to leave that spot until I'd found a fresh image. The sun got lower and lower. The temperature dropped. Soon I was sitting there shivering with my pad of paper, but I just waited really *looking* at the water, letting what I saw really speak to me. Eventually, I did think of a completely fresh metaphor. I haven't done my job until I've let that fresh thinking arise.

How much do you think setting matters for a potential book buyer?

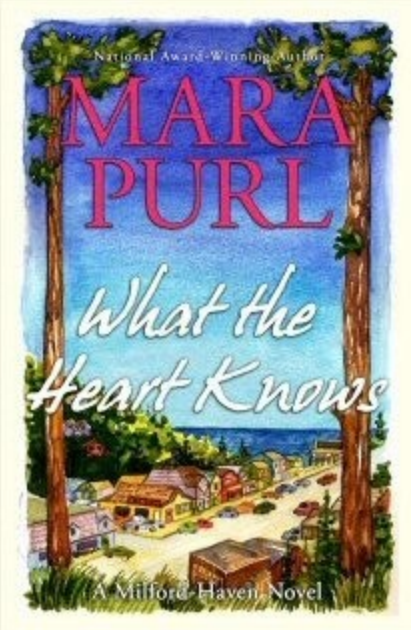
When I look for a new book to read, I sometimes look for a "world" I'd like to inhabit for a while, giving me a chance to travel to a different time or place. So if I were to see a Milford-Haven Novel on the shelf, I'd be immediately drawn to its setting! And what will convey that setting? Two things: the words, and the images. So I'm thrilled the description rang a bell for you!

I just received word from my publisher that Ingram, the largest wholesaler in the U.S., is featuring the cover of *What the Heart Knows* on its current catalogue, so I'd say so far book buyers are definitely responding to my new book!



Mara writing on the California coast

How did you choose to have watercolor paintings for your covers? Tell us about the process of conveying Milford-Haven for the covers.



I am so very fortunate to have Mary Helsaple as the artist doing the watercolors for my book covers! Mary is a renowned artist and has won multiple awards for her magnificent work. Mary is a friend, and became a research resource for my protagonist painter “Miranda Jones.”

So I’d been consulting with Mary for several years on particulars of painting techniques. It was very natural, then, to begin actually working with her on the cover art.

Our process begins with my story, and with the specific point of view of my protagonist. So when we glimpse the cover, we’re seeing what Miranda sees. I begin with a long conversation with Mary, during which I describe in detail the theme, the premise, the arc of the story of this particular book.

I usually have a fairly clear concept of what I think we should see on the cover, and sometimes will even do a rough (and really

terrible!) sketch. Fortunately, Mary “gets” me very intuitively, and she begins to do rough (and really wonderful!) sketches. We go back and forth until we get the basic shape of the piece. Then Mary does a watercolor.

Next, the original art goes to the graphic designer, and he begins aligning the other cover elements, adjusting colors, and taking the cover through the next several iterations until the publisher and I are satisfied with the image. Yet, that sounds far too clinical. In fact, there’s an element of magic in the covers. They sing, they shimmer, they shine. And they reach out and touch the hearts of my readers, just as they touch my heart.

Thanks, Mara, and best of luck with your book series!

by Cynthia Morris / Posted in [The Writing Life](#) / Aug 31 2011

1 COMMENTS



sabine tuzik says:
August 31, 2011 at 10:36 am

Beautiful and inspiring. Makes my head spins with possibilities as I’m dashing off to the airport. Oui, on my way to ... you’ve guessed it, Curious Paris! A bientot.
Sabine

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