



Mapping the Journey of Your Heart - Part 1

First installment of my interview with Mara Purl, award winning author of *Where the Heart Lives*

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Welcome to the first post of my new blog Where Is She Heading.

You may know me as a volunteer, international travelers, actress, author and lifelong learner - This post focuses on the journey an author takes when writing, be it fiction, prose or non-fiction.

I am privileged to know and recently had the opportunity to interview my friend, Mara Purl, as part of a book tour for her book, **Where the Heart Lives**.

Mara and I share many of the same passions - writing, acting, international travel, and most importantly, following your own heart as counsel and guide for where you are heading.

In the first part of our interview, I asked Mara about her writing of her most recent book, *Where the Heart Lives*. She explained how she adapted the stories of Milford Haven USA from an award winning and highly popular radio drama in the UK, to a series of novels and short stories. Here is what she shared with me.

INTERVIEW WITH MARA PURL FOR WHERE THE HEART LIVES

First the questions about your Milford Haven series - from radio drama to award winning novels.

Jane - *When you created the radio drama, did you draft an outline of the main plot for the entire series, and then fill in the details as you went along?*

Mara - **I tend to work in concentric circles rather than linear fashion. As I look back on the experience, I can see that I started with the "heart" to develop the concept and then had to work with my "head" to work out all the details of the stories. The story began as I was drawn to the specialness of the small town where I spent a summer performing in a play. The more I thought about it, the more I realized the potential of setting the piece in small town as the framework for the story. After that summer, I was performing on Days of Our Lives, and began to understand the classic soap opera elements of having a core group of characters in a generic setting.**

But my choice was to use a very specific setting, so I placed my fictional Milford Haven on the Central coast of California. In a way you could say I began by putting a magnifying lens over that part of a map and trying to imagine what it would be like to live in small town in that area. When you look at the book cover of my second novel Where the Heart Lives, you will see that is image on the book cover!

Jane - *Who are your major characters?*

Mara - The three characters at the center of the story are Miranda, the painter with two close friends who are very different; Sally, ten years older and from a farm in Arkansas; and Samantha, twenty years older, and a hotshot environmentalist.

Branching out from these three women, each needed a romance, and in some cases more than one, because as you know, many women's first romances do not work out. After the men were created, then came other characters that were the antagonists, and others who help them find their passion and emphasize their differences.

Jane - *Were these your protagonists for the original radio drama?*

Yes they were. But when you create a radio drama or a show, it is always an ensemble cast. In narrative voice as used in fiction, stories generally have more focus on protagonists.

Jane - *How did you develop the plotlines in the radio drama? And is it a different process when you write the novels?*

Mara - In Milford-Haven U.S.A., I knew the core story and would then develop episodes or events for each of the three women in a linear process, taking each of them several steps forward in time, steps that might require a few episodes. Then I'd go back and figure out where their stories might intersect or diverge. It was a very organic process, with the story coming right out of the characters themselves: their goals, desires, fears, hesitations, needs. To express these, I would get ideas about outside events that would impact them and change their course. And by the way, sometimes the characters would surprise me!

Jane - *How exactly can an author be surprised by her own characters?*

Mara - I think it happened naturally because I allowed the story to unfold. I opened myself to what the character would do, not what I wanted to make the character do. This is what allowed the story to evolve organically and it ended up so much richer.

Jane - *So do you feel you're actually creating the characters and the story?*

Mara - Maybe the word "create" has to be redefined. I certainly do create in the sense that I'm not copying anything. The ideas I write are fresh and original. Yet as a writer, I feel what I really do is prime the pump and sit ready and willing to transcribe. I find so much of writing is actually listening to an inner voice, an inner sense of what's real.

Jane - *You feel what you write is real, even though you're writing fiction?*

Mara - Yes! My commitment in story writing it to tell the truth. Here's one of "Mara's Maxims." I feel that non-fiction is about facts; and Fiction is about truth. Fiction is a powerful lens through which you can look more deeply at a situation in life. I work to get out of the way and let the truth of each character come out. What does he really feel? What would she really say? At the end of it, I am usually pleasantly surprised and at times, shocked at what has come through.

Jane - *I have similar experiences when I am enacting a character*

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
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for the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. I recently began telling a story of how my character met her husband with absolutely no idea where it would end. I found because of the back-story that I had created for my woman, I could just begin talking and craft a story about what it was like to be her going through an actual experience. It was thrilling to see the end result and I am excited for the next opportunity to create something new.

Mara - Wonderful! Sounds like you, too, were "listening" for a sense of what might be true about that character. That means you were very fully present in that moment.

Jane - Your characters are diverse, and as we are only in book 2 of 5, many are still quite a mystery. My mentor reminds me that what many people want most of all is to be seen, heard and loved. Do you feel that fits your characters and if not, are there some who have a different MO for their lives?

Mara - I agree that to be seen, heard and loved is a basic human condition. What I feel is the bottom line for my characters is their journey to unravel the snarls of their lives and figure out their core purpose. Their questions are more "What is my true identity? Who does that make me? Where am I going? What am I afraid of? What breakthrough am I trying to have?"

Several of the main characters are at different levels and different chapters of their life, but the underlying questions are the same.

For example, Miranda had been told by both her parents all her life to "use your head." She was told to value smartness and use her head, as sort of an externally imposed mantra. Miranda chafes at this. But Miranda's sister Meredith had the same message and embraced it. She did use her head and reveled in the results. She gets her fulfillment from using her head and also her fortune, joy and fun. She believes it is her destiny.

For Miranda, she feels that something does not fit. When she hears "use your head," her response is always, "but what about my heart?" Before the novels begin, she takes an impulsive drive from San Francisco down Hwy 1. It is a road that is not necessarily about destination but about the journey. As you drive, you are---literally and figuratively---on the "edge." On one side of you is solid land; on the other side is moving water. It's as if they represent conscious and subconscious thought. So as you ride that cusp, the membrane between head and heart is thin, and you can begin to hear your own intuition more clearly.

Before the trip, she had done paintings of seascapes and coastal scenes and during her trip, as she rounds the bend in the road, she comes across a view that's exactly like one she had painted, but never seen in real life. She's rattled, but it inspires her to stop and explore the little town. The town somehow feels like home even though this didn't make sense intellectually. It is not a crisp, clean, Head type town, but more of a Heart town with galleries, cafes and little shops like stationers and craft stores. She goes back to San Francisco, packs up and moves to this "inconvenient" location. Her manager, parents and sister all think she is crazy, but this is where she feels life. She's not only thinking . . . She's also feeling.

Another example is Samantha, who's totally cut off from her heart and has been for many years. While she married for love, her husband was so jealous and tyrannical---including not wanting children---she ended up leaving the marriage and divorcing before she realized she was pregnant. She tried to raise the child but found out she was not cut out to be a single mother, and gave her son up for adoption. She went on to get a PhD and became an environmentalist. Now, she's dealing with a tsunami of emotions and doubt about who she is, who her son might be, and wondering why she didn't work harder on her marriage. While outwardly she's an accomplished woman, at her center she's now admitting that she has a lot of questions about who she is and what she should do.

A third example is Sally, who's very clear about herself and who she is and had a great relationship with her mother. Even so, she had a horrendous heartbreak late in high school and chose to leave Arkansas in order to make a new life.

Jane - I really like Sally and see her like seaweed, able to ride the tides and very unflappable.

Mara - You're right that she can adapt to enormous change and flow with the currents of life. But she can stand up for herself when the need arises, and she is honest and authentic without a false bone in her body. Yet there's something in her that wants so badly to "please" a man. It's heart-breaking to see her to allow herself to be taken for granted by this man she's been dating for several years, because she is so deserving. She feels time is running out for her. She'd pinned her hopes on one man to help her expand her business and her life with a commitment. But he just does not get it about her. A lesser woman would be crushed by what he does to her. How will she establish her value for her own heart and her life to come? The stories continue, but Sally will use her heart and the wisdom she received from her mother by the end of the second book.

Jane - You're writing a novel series, a form that's becoming more popular these days. How did you decide how many books to have in the novel series?

Mara - In the radio drama, there were over 100 episodes to be developed into books. I knew that 100 or 20 books would be too many so I settled on ten books that'll be two pentologies---that is, two series of five books each. Trilogies are very popular these days . . . I'm doing something a little different.

The first pentology will answer the five questions of the heart, which is why "heart" is in each of these five titles. Why five? That, too, came organically from the story itself. The series begins with journalist Christine Christian. And there are five questions that every journalist asks - who, what, when, where, and why. Book one was "What," book two is "Where," and next up is book three with "Why."

So in terms of the overall structure, all the main characters' stories will come to an ending by the end of the fifth novel. In the second pentology, I will focus on the interesting collateral characters, while continuing the stories of the main characters in the second 5 novels. Think of it like a favorite vacation spot you like to return to for a new experience.

Jane - I love your novels, and am also enjoying your shorter stories (or prequels) to the novels, such as When Hummers Dream and When Whales Watch. What inspired you to develop the short stories?

Mara - The more I write about Milford Haven, the more the characters' lives keep expanding. There's just more than I can fit in the novels. Also, I hear from readers that they'd like to know more about the specifics of my characters' lives. So I began the short stories with a bit more detail about Miranda, a wildlife painter. I see the current short stories as the "critter chronicles" because in each one, we see Miranda fulfilling a painting commissions, while the novels focus on her everyday life.

Each commission takes her on the research journey of photographing the animal she's been hired to paint---learning about their behavior, how they move, their seasons etc. When Whale Watch brings up part of her back-story (and my own history on a Greenpeace ship) about her previous quest to save sperm whales being hunted by commercial whalers.

Her actual job in this story, however, is to paint gray whales, which are known to migrate from Baja to the Arctic, and are beloved by many Californians as they trace along the California coast. During her gray whale watching research, Miranda notices another species of whale in the area. She can tell, because it's acting differently. It turns out to be a sperm whale. All my interviews and most of my research said it could not be a sperm whale in the story, because they inhabit the deeper oceans, not the coastal water. But my heart said there could be a sperm whale closer to the coast, so I kept researching. After a lot of digging, sure enough I finally found there was a rare sighting of a sperm whale off California in 1996---the very year in which the story was set!

Jane - That was Divine guidance for sure and all about following your heart.

Mara - That's how it felt. Is there interspecies communication? We accept that there is when it comes to dogs and cats and other pets. Yet we find it hard to believe with wild creatures. I believe this is one of the frontiers of discovery on our own planet. It felt as if the whales had this story they wanted me to tell. Even if that's just my fantasy, I'm bringing new ideas to my readers for them to consider.

I had a similar experience when I wrote When Hummers Dream. While I was writing the story, a humming bird would hover outside my window as I wrote. He only hovered there when I was working on "his" story. Eventually, I promised him I would do a good job and tell his story truthfully. Many readers who know hummingbirds really resonate with that story.

This time I didn't have a whale outside my window! But I'm asking myself and my readers . . . with the biggest brain on the planet . . . What is this species thinking about? I felt I was getting signals and heart nudges from a whale.

In addition to the critter chronicles, I also have holiday shorts stories and also some sequels coming for the other characters. As the world of Milford Haven continues to evolve, it is a dynamic process.

Ultimately, it's all about my readers. I want to give them the best possible experience I can, in every way. Writing more frequent stories helps to keep my readers happy between novels.

I will post the second part of our interview next Friday where we discussed our similar history of living abroad as children, and how that has colored our lives and shaped our outlook and how we follow our hearts.

Until next time, please

Travel in Safety.

Jane Stanfield
Where Is She Heading