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# A Conversation with author Milford-Haven Author Mara Purl



Mike Parker, Entertainment Examiner

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Milford-Haven author Mara Purl  
Credits: Mara Purl

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Actress and author **Mara Purl** pioneered women's small-town fiction with her popular and critically acclaimed **Milford-Haven** novels. But her novels were not the first incarnation of this beloved fictitious town. The citizens of **Milford-Haven, U.S.A.** have been delighting audiences across the pond since 1992, when it first appeared as the first American radio drama ever licensed and broadcast by the BBC. The show went on to reach an audience of 4.5 million listeners throughout the U.K.

**Mike Parker** – You come from a long line of artistic souls, but let's face it, there are challenges to pursuing a career in the creative arts. What kind of advice, encouragement or warnings did you get from your family regarding your career choice?

**Mara Purl** – I have two or three aspects to that answer. When I was around three years old I thought the hearth to our fireplace was a stage. I did a show every night for my parents - I thought everyone did that. My parents would watch, and I'm sure there was some eye-rolling. Later, I think both my parents wanted to expose me and my sister to as many opportunities as possible, so if we showed any interest in anything, they would try to get us involved.



My dad didn't want us to narrow our lives down too quickly, but they also wanted us to know how difficult a life in the theatre could be. When I was 12 I got the lead to 'Cinderella in Flower Land,' and my mom said, 'Well, now you have to start rehearsing. No time to play, you have to rehearse.' I think my mom was trying to see if I could be discouraged, but it just didn't work on me. Once we were grown, you can't imagine how supportive our parents were and still are. They are tremendously supportive and enthusiastic.

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A woman with blonde hair is the central figure, wearing a dark blue, short-sleeved, knee-length dress with a wide, light-colored scarf draped around her neck. She is standing outdoors, with her hands in her pockets, looking slightly to the right. The background is a soft-focus scene of autumn trees with yellow and orange leaves. The text 'ANN TAYLOR' is at the top left, 'Our New PRE-FALL COLLECTION Is Here!' is in the middle left, and 'SHOP NOW >' is at the bottom left. A small blue play button icon is in the top right corner.

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**Mara** – Oh, my contrary nature (laughs). I was in the town of Cambria, this beautiful California coastal town, performing in a jewelbox of a theatre for the summer. I grew up in Tokyo, moved to New York and then LA. I knew nothing about small towns. I was intrigued by small town life and how people related to each other. Everyone knows everyone in a small town.

One night a couple came back stage to tell us how much they enjoyed the play. It turned out that they owned a little radio station in town. The man, whose name was Wally, said if I ever wanted to do a show on the radio to just let him know.

After the play concluded and I went back to LA to shoot **Days of our Lives**. I had always thought soap opera was not serious performing, and I didn't take it seriously until I was offered a job working on the show. I was immediately impressed with the directors, the writers, my fellow actors. During scenes I wasn't in, I would watch to learn about the art form, and it is really about storytelling. It doesn't wrap up in two hours. It's more like life. Of course it is exaggerated and there are too many coincidences and silly circumstances. But what I realized is that soap opera writing is iconic writing that deals with archtypes. Even though our lives are not as big as those archtypes, inside us our feelings are that big, so soap opera is a valid enactment of our feelings.

That invitation from Wally started rolling around in my mind. I started writing a script about a small California town loosely based on Cambria. I sent Wally the script, but didn't hear anything back from him. I couldn't get him on the phone, so I drove up to see him. When I walked into the station it was obvious something had changed. There were rock 'n' roll posters on the wall and dishes in the sink and three guys sitting around who stood up and told me that Wally had sold the station.

I asked if they had received my scripts, and they said, 'Oh, yeah. We threw those away.'

I asked if they would be interested in the show if I had sponsors. Well, that got their attention. I had never sold anything in my life, but I walked up and down Main Street looking for sponsors and amazingly most of the businesses said 'Yes.' The station's management took one look at the vouchers and said, 'How soon can you start?'

**Parker** - So, that got you on the air in the U.S. How did the show become such a hit in the United Kingdom.

**Mara** - The show as a local hit, because there was so much local interest. It was, after all, based on the small town where it was being broadcast. That led to another question. Would the show work if there were not local interest? We took the show to a syndicator, but they told us that radio drama in the US was not a viable option.

It was all a numbers game to them. They believed if other people weren't doing it, then it couldn't be done. I took a booth at the National Association of Broadcasters convention, thinking it might be a good place to take the next step for the show. On the last day of the show a couple of men came down the aisle and said, 'The BBC's Radio Five has been trying to find you.'

I called Radio Five's Pat Ewing, and two weeks later the show became the first American radio drama licensed by the BBC.

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**Parker** – The radio dramas have led to your **Milford-Haven, U.S.A** series of novels, and I believe you have a new one coming out soon. Can you talk about the process of adapting the radio drama format into a novel?

**Mara** – While the show was still a hit on the radio, I started getting requests for the novels. I had always wanted to write a novel, but I was waiting for the right time. I didn't know how to write a novel. I started writing novelizations of the store's, but they weren't real novels. Having grown up performing, dialogue comes naturally to me, but I spend years working on my narrative voice. I found a brilliant editor to help me.

When I began to realize I was writing women's fiction, whatever that is, I came up with a theory. I tell a story to my husband, and when the eyes roll I know he is thinking, 'Get to the point.' But if I tell the story too quickly to a woman friend, she will stop me and ask for the details. Both totally valid ways of processing information, but both completely different.

Women think in code. There is information that is embedded in the descriptions. A woman will pick up on that, while a man will want to know what she is doing.

Men's fiction has velocity, while women's fiction has a lingering feel. You get the color of the flickering candlelight and the smell of the roast; the emotional connection is more important than the action. As I began to embrace the notion that I was writing women's fiction I began to feel that my books were conversations with my girlfriends. We have a lot of shared experiences.

There is a theme in the novel writing that was not a theme in the radio dramas. It emerged later, and it has to do with the head vs the heart. In our culture the head tends to take precedence. Our educational system supports that. Everything that has to do with the heart is dismissed, for the most part, as being irrelevant or silly. But maybe the heart has valuable information. Maybe your instincts will tell you not to go down that dark alley. As I bring people into this series, I am mindful that each character is wrestling with that tension. I invite the reader to examine those questions for themselves.

**Parker** – For entertainment to work it has to be, well, entertaining. But not all entertainment stands the test of time. Most of it never makes it past the 15 minutes of fame standard. What makes entertainment, 'good' entertainment?

**Mara** – Good entertainment has to grab you right away. A good artist works very hard to make a phenomenal first impression. You can't begin apologetically. You have to begin with something compelling. I also think freshness and originality is important to good entertainment. An example would be, I write about a coastal community, so I have a lot of sunsets going on. How many ways can you write about a sunset? One day in Cambria I sat at a landing to watch the sun go down. I needed a fresh metaphor, but every thing that came to me was just more of the same. But I wasn't leaving until I got the metaphor. Finally something came to me that was completely fresh. I wrote it down and put it in the book. That's my job as a writer. The person who reads my book doesn't need to know what it took for me to get that metaphor. They just need the experience. They need to be touched, moved and inspired. It is a very tall order, but that is the gig.

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I'm intrigued by your attitude toward entertainment. I think it is a huge question. Is the artist doing what they do for themselves or for others? I think the answer needs to be a combination of both. Our work as artists should be passionate, but should also impact others. I think you have to get self out of the way in order to allow your true self to emerge. I am intrigued that 'author' and 'authenticity' have the same root word.

Click here to download a sneak preview of Mara's prequel, [When Hummers Dream: A Milford-Haven Story for the Amazon Kindle](#) free during the month of August. Don't have a Kindle? You can read [the story on PDF](#) here!

### The Seven Questions

1. What's your favorite sound?

**Mara** – Water. Rushing water.

2. What makes you happy?

**Mara** – Touching, moving and inspiring someone.

3. What makes you angry?

**Mara** – Lack of integrity.

4. What is the secret of success?

**Mara** – Listen to your heart. Success is internal, not external. When you feel your core mission you are the rushing water, and that is pure joy.

5. If you could have dinner with anyone in history, living or dead, who would it be?

**Mara** – Mary Baker Eddy

6. What is the epitaph that is written on your tombstone?

**Mara** – "She told a good story."

7. When you get to heaven, what is the first thing you want to hear God say to you?

**Mara** – "Here's your next assignment."



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