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Creator of 'Milford-Haven U.S.A.,' based on Cambria, to speak at upcoming events

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By Sarah Linn — slinn@thetribunenews.com

As an actress, author and musician whose fictional California town Milford-Haven — modeled after Cambria — has inspired novels, short stories and a radio drama, **Mara Puri** is aware of the constant tug-of-war between head and heart.

"In our culture ... we believe that logic and intellect will win the day in most instances. We're expected to use our heads and be smart," Puri said. At the same time, she added, humans tend to ignore "heart information," also known as instinct or intuition.

"In the last few years, I've been asking myself what life would look like if we paid as much information to that as we pay to the head information," Puri said. "Would we find life in a new balance?"

Puri will speak about heart health Saturday, Sept. 14, at a sold-out lecture at the **San Luis Obispo Botanical Garden**, part of a series sponsored by **French Hospital Medical Center** and the garden.

In addition, Puri will lead two workshops at the **Central Coast Writers' Conference**, Sept. 20 and 21 in San Luis Obispo.



Mara Puri is an actress, author and musician who created the fictional California town Milford-Haven, modeled after Cambria. **BONNIE YOUNG**

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"I have such a connection to San Luis Obispo and the Central Coast," said Puri, who often returns to Cambria for research purposes. "This just feels like my head and heart have come together in all the right ways."

Puri, who worked as a journalist before branching out into acting, encountered Cambria when she was invited to appear in a production of Gardner McKay's "Sea Marks" at the **Pewter Plough Playhouse**. The quaint, cozy small-town atmosphere came as culture shock for the actress, who grew up in Tokyo and lived in Los Angeles.

Puri returned to Los Angeles to join the cast of the NBC soap opera "Days of Our Lives" as nurse Daria Cook. At the same time, she started working on a radio drama using Cambria as her inspiration.

"It immediately occurred to me that this could be a lens, a framework for a different way of telling a story," she recalled, one uniquely suited to a small-town setting.

"**Milford-Haven U.S.A.**," which debuted in 1992, won over audiences across the United States and the United Kingdom, eventually earning 4.5 million listeners during its BBC run.

"The show went on to have a much bigger life than I could have possibly predicted," she said, noting that the series' popularity coincided with efforts by the residents of a real-life Milford Haven, located on the western coast of Wales, to revitalize their town. They threw Puri a parade.

During a hiatus for "Milford-Haven U.S.A.," Puri approached publishers with the idea of expanding the Milford-Haven universe in print.

"Nobody was interested in a serial story in print," she said, especially not booksellers with limited shelf space. "At that point, it was an uphill battle to sell a series with multiple parts."

Now, with the advent of e-books and tablets, Puri said readers are clamoring to spend more time with their favorite characters.

In addition to prequels "When Hummers Dream," "When Whales Watch" and "Whose Angel Key Ring," Puri is working on a five-part novel series. **Bellekeep Books** published the first book in the series, "What the Heart Knows," in 2011 and the second, "Where the Heart Lives," in 2012.

Her third novel, "Why Hearts Keep Secrets," is slated to come out on Mother's Day.

Puri acknowledged that she shares a lot with her protagonist, artist Miranda Jones, and her friends, restaurant owner Sally O'Malley and environmental crusader Samantha Hugo.

"In a way, those three women might represent my past, present and future," she said, with soulful, self-reliant Arkansas transplant Sally — voiced by sister Linda Puri on "Milford-Haven U.S.A." — representing her family roots.

Mara Puri also relates to the character she voiced on the show, Miranda, a contemporary woman who's "not going to sacrifice her core beliefs for any kind of comfort." She sees Samantha, who struggles to balance her brilliant career with her personal relationships, as an older version of Miranda.

"There's a lot of courage" with these characters," she said. "There's pain, but there's going to be real incredible growth through ... these five novels."

If you go ...

Mara Puri will present two workshops dealing with serial storytelling and audio books at the Central Coast Writers' Conference on Sept. 20 and 21 at Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo. For more information, contact Judy Salamacha at 801-1422 or judysalamacha@gmail.com or visit www.communityprograms.net/wc/index.htm.

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