

Recent News | Top Stories

Santa Barbara City Battles over Vacation Rentals and Coastal Housing
By Nick Welsh

New COVID Variants and What They Mean
By Jean Yamamura

Two Santa Barbara County Residents Test Positive for U.K. Variant of COVID
By Indy Staff

Santa Barbara's New Shopping Cart Ordinance Puts Onus on Business Owners
By Nick Welsh

¿Hablás Español? Your Skill Is Needed at Vaccine Drive
By Jean Yamamura

Premiere Events



Online Event: History Happy Hour – Santa Barbara's Powerful Women
Wed, Mar 24 5:00 PM
Santa Barbara



Get News in Your Inbox

Sign Up

Books

Mara Purl's Two New Novellas

Writer with Strong Central Coast Ties Pens "When Whales Watch" and "When Otters Play"



Mara Purl | Credit: Dennis Eamon Young

By Matt Kettmann

Sun Mar 21, 2021 | 4:21pm



Los Angeles-based author Mara Purl is such a frequent Central Coast visitor that her two new novellas, *When Whales Watch* and *When Otters Play*, are largely set here, from Morro Bay to Anacapa Island. She recently answered a few questions about herself, her books, and her writing career.



Credit: Courtesy

Where are you from originally?

I was born in New Haven, CT, but moved to Tokyo, Japan as a child, when my father's career took us there. I attended the American School in Japan, where the curriculum is American, but the student body is comprised of 40 nationalities. That multicultural childhood informs the rest of my life and my writing.

My family came back to the States for "home leave" every year, and we invariably visited Santa Barbara, where my parents' best friends live. Dad's friend Dr. Paul Wienpahl was a professor at UCSB and we stayed at their home high up on Tunnel Road with the most astonishing view. That view has always informed my writing, too. I used to stay up most of the night to watch the moon over the ocean and knew I'd have to write about that one day.

Where do you live now?

I live in Los Angeles, where I moved for work, but am such a frequent visitor to the Central Coast that my heart lives here.

Along with feeling that forever connection from childhood, I had an experience farther north, in Cambria. I spent a summer there performing in a play. In the evenings I was on stage in Gardner McKay's "Sea Marks," and by day, I was intrigued by life in a small town. What a contrast to Tokyo and to Los Angeles!

I wrote a radio drama with half the characters in Santa Barbara, and the other half in my fictional town of "Milford-Haven" up the coast. Ultimately, the show was broadcast by the BBC where it found an audience of 4.5 million. That, in turn, led to interest from publishers who wanted me to develop the drama into a novel series.

As the books have evolved, I've become active in writing communities in L.A., Ventura, Santa Barbara, and SLO. We do events, conduct seminars and conferences, and support bookstores like Chaucers. And because my series is set in the region, I'm always doing fresh research locally.

How did you get into writing as a career?

Writing has been a full-time pursuit, or nearly so, for over 20 years. Before that I performed in theatre and played Daria Cook in *Days of Our Lives*. I do still perform as an audiobook narrator, and am sometimes invited to return to the theatre.

Before the pandemic, I was in productions in San Luis Obispo and Oakland of "Becoming Julia Morgan," a marvelous tour-de-force play. But my writing never stops.

In fact, the Milford-Haven novels and novellas keep expanding! I'm usually working on three books at a time: one that's just being outlined; one that's got most of my waking (and sleeping) hours; and one that's in final polish. This is also how my mentor Louis L'Amour wrote: multiple plates spinning.

Any advice for aspiring writers?

First, I would say if you've heard the "call" and feel that you should be writing, pay attention. It may be that you have just one book to write; it may be that once you start, you'll always be writing. Hearing that "call" signifies you have something to say.

Second, get all the good help you can, not so much from critique groups, but rather from mentors and teachers at professional writing conferences, community colleges, or programs like UCLA Extension (where I have done some teaching.) There's so much to learn it can seem overwhelming. But it's a journey of self-discovery that will bring clarity, insight and adventure.

I love fellow authors and love connecting and helping in various ways. Writing is a solitary endeavor, which is all the more reason that finding your writing community is a great encouragement.

Tell us about some of your earlier books.

When I first started adapting the *Milford-Haven* scripts into prose form, they were terrible! They were overloaded with dialogue, which I knew how to write; but underwhelming in description and sadly lacking in narrative voice. I worked with experienced editors and asked that they be ruthless. They were.

In the arts, we must train ourselves to listen for the truth: the truth of our characters, and how they would and would not behave; the truth of circumstances and how they would or wouldn't play out; and the truth in constructive criticism. If we can get ourselves out of the way, we can listen better and write better.

Though I'll never stop learning, I have reached a point where I know when something works. My books have won 50 book awards, been on some best-seller lists, and gotten good reviews, which is certainly encouraging

This "voice" I've mentioned is the essence of originality, and although it's inherent, it's not always easy to access. Since I write novels set literally on the West Coast, I have to write about sunsets over the ocean. Can you imagine how many authors have written about how many sunsets? Even I have at least one per book!

One day I determined I would find a fresh metaphor so I went to the beach and waited as the sun descended. And I waited, and waited some more. The sun sank, I was getting cold and I had to go back to my car for a sweater. Eventually every bit of light left the sky, but I was not going to leave that beach until I could summon a metaphor I'd never read and never used before. At last, it came.

That's the job. Listen for the word, watch for the image, wait for the thought that truly expresses what you're trying to say. (By the way, to find out what metaphor that was, people will have to read my books!)

Tell us about the new books.

I'd like to tell you about two books, both featuring the same protagonist, both coastal adventure novellas: *When Whales Watch* and *When Otters Play*. In both stories, wildlife artist Miranda Jones is doing research to complete commissioned works, both of which are murals, but she always does paintings as well, and her works are featured in prominent galleries in both San Francisco and Milford-Haven.

In *When Whales Watch*, Miranda embarks from Morro Bay on a whale watching trip. She'll take photos and do sketches and later do a mural of the migrating gray whales for the Point Vicente Interpretive Center in Los Angeles, which is a real place where I did research. However, like me, Miranda was once on a voyage to save sperm whales. I was a member of a Greenpeace voyage and we traveled 6,000 miles in the North Pacific for six weeks, capturing film of sperm whales being slaughtered by Russian commercial whalers. I wrote about this for *Rolling Stone* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, and brought our footage to the Today Show.

This was a life-changing experience for me, and for my character. So I had written about this as a harrowing experience that left us devastated but also committed to saving this highly intelligent species. In my heart, I always wanted to write about how these creatures with the biggest brains on earth would behave when they were *not* being hunted. That was the genesis of *When Whales Watch*: that unexpectedly, this deep-ocean species shows up in coastal waters, and events trigger a gargantuan male to protect his pod of females and babies. There's an explosive nexus of events that brings together benevolent, watchful humans, as well as malevolent, neglectful ones, and through that lens we get to see into the hearts and minds of the whales.

And how about the other book?

When Otters Play is set in Santa Barbara and in Anacapa. I focused on just the opposite kind of oceanic creature, in that sea otters live their whole lives within sight of humans, sticking to coastal waters. They're the only sea creatures with hands. They're playful, clever tricksters. But they're also highly protective of their young, and they're an index species, meaning both that it's highly adapted to its surroundings, and also that its well-being is an indicator of the health of the region. Urchins eat the holdfasts (or root systems) of kelp forests; but sea otters eat urchins which allows them and many other coastal species to use the kelp as their safe habitat. There's new research tracing heart disease in sea otters to local toxins, so studying and caring for them could have implications for our own protection.

What experiences from your own life did you apply to this story?

The Greenpeace voyage gave me the original source material for *When Whales Watch*. And during many visits to Santa Barbara and to Morro Bay, I became fascinated by sea otters. I learned a great deal about rescued otters from Erin Lenihan with the Sea Otter Rescue program at the Monterey Bay Aquarium; and about sea otters in the wild locally from Brian Hatfield with the U.S. Geological Survey who monitors and cares for sea otters in the wild along the Central Coast.

Both the whales and the sea otters have been threatened almost to the point of extinction. A sea otter pup looks like a human baby in a tiny outer suit, sensitive and tenderly dependent, eager to participate in the world into which it has been born. An adult otter can navigate underwater with awareness and techniques we don't have. What an adventure we can have if we pay attention and learn from them! This is the adventure my readers can touch in these novellas.

What do you hope readers learn or otherwise take away from the book?

I hope readers of *When Whales Watch* come away with the same sense of wonder that I have for sperm whales. They transmit the equivalent of ultrasound images. They see into the structures of all the life around them in ways we are only now approximating. They have highly evolved cultural patterns, complex communication over vast distances and have life-long relationships. We dare not miss what they have to teach us.

And I hope readers of *When Otters Play* recognize many special places in Santa Barbara, as well as its unique quality and atmosphere, a city known for its beauty but also for its largess.

Buy Mara Purl's books at MaraPurl.com.

Every day, the staff of the Santa Barbara Independent works hard to sort out truth from rumor and keep you informed of what's happening across the entire Santa Barbara community. Now there's a way to directly enable these efforts. Support the Independent by making a direct contribution or with a subscription to Indy+.