

## Colorado Springs author Mara Purl behind popular Milford-Haven series

By Jennifer Mulsom Jul 21, 2020



Colorado Springs author and actor Mara Purl writes the award-winning series of Milford-Haven books. They were sparked by her time acting on the California coast and her time starring on the soap opera "Days of Our Lives." Courtesy



There's a tiny town on the central California coast that holds a special place in Mara Purl's heart, even if it doesn't exist on any map.

The picturesque fictitious village is called Milford-Haven, and it's based on Cambria, the real California town where the longtime Colorado Springs actor and author once lived while performing in a summer production of the play "Sea Marks" by Gardner McKay.

Milford-Haven is the setting for Purl's bestselling and award-winning series of women's fiction books, which feature the intertwining storylines of numerous, colorful characters who often struggle with life's bigger questions: What is their purpose? And how does one listen to their heart? The first novel in the series, "What the Heart Knows: A Milford Haven Novel," debuted in 2011.

"It's like the seed before the flower. That's what a little town is," says Purl from home, where she's polishing off her latest book in the series. She splits her time between here and Los Angeles, where she narrates audio books, including her own. "There's an intimacy. There's no anonymity in a small town. The results of your actions come back to you quickly. This is a great lens, a great microcosm for storytelling."

Writing and performing have always been intertwined for Purl, who, at 3, began writing her own plays and staging them nightly on the hearth in front of her family's fireplace.

"Didn't everyone?" she thought as a child. "That was life."

And if Purl's last name seems familiar, perhaps it's due to her younger sister, Linda Purl, a longtime actor who's been in a number of stage productions, TV shows and TV movies, including "Matlock," "Homeland" and "The Oath." Mara used to cast her sibling in her nightly shows as a child.

"From the moment she was born I was handing her scripts," says Mara. "Can you read yet? This is your part. I probably imprinted her. She's spent the rest of her life being handed scripts."

Post-college, Mara's career path was two-fold: journalism and acting. She worked for The Associated Press, Rolling Stone, The Financial Times of London, The Christian Science Monitor and others. Eventually she wound up in Los Angeles, where she ran into actor Alan Alda one day after an audition, and impulsively asked him how he made it all work — the acting, directing and writing. He told her he acted so he knew how to direct and write.

"I embraced that idea," she says. "My writing makes me a better performer. And my performing makes me a better writer."

Fervent fans of the soap opera "Days of Our Lives" might remember Mara, who starred as nurse Darla Cook. She took the job, she remembers, with a bit of a snobbish attitude, believing soap operas were beneath her, a trained actor. But it's where she fell in love with the idea of long-form storytelling, following multiple characters and watching their stories intertwine with those around them. This is how she came to feel the muse tapping her on the shoulder.

"What if I write a soap opera in a little town loosely based on Cambria?" she says.

After leaving "Days," she began to write about Milford-Haven, so named for a line from Shakespeare's play "Cymbeline," in which Mara starred as Imogen: "Meet me in Cambria, in Milford Haven."

The series didn't originate in book form, however. Mara wrote it as a radio drama that debuted on a station in Cambria. Her words clearly touched hearts, as eventually the BBC in London took notice and offered her a contract, making it the first American serial the organization had ever broadcast. It went on to accrue 4.5 million listeners, which caught the hungry eye of publishers, who asked her to turn the radio series into books.

"I didn't think I was ready to do it. I didn't think I was good enough to do it," she says. "After 20 years I'm an overnight success."

A dozen novels now exist in the series, the latest of which is "When the Heart Listens," a prequel novella. Mara also has written a play and several nonfiction books, including "Act Right: A Manual for the On-Camera Actor" with actor Erin Gray.

And for the last three years, Mara has starred in the title role in the play "Becoming Julia Morgan," about the famous architect. So far, the production has been staged in two Morgan-built structures.

After so many years in the fiction world, Mara has watched trends come and go. She's heard people say nobody reads anymore. Not true, she says. Also that e-books were the next big thing. But there's been a pushback to that trend, now that we're on our screens so much of the day. She believes people are returning to physical books as a respite.

Trends will always come and go, but storytelling will never be lost.

"Nonfiction is about facts. Fiction is about truth," says Mara. "Truth is hard to get at. Fiction can be a powerful lens that allows you to see into much deeper issues. It's safer. It's more removed from you. You don't feel confronted or vulnerable. Good fiction helps us see things we wouldn't see otherwise."

