What the Heart Knows: A Milford-Haven Novel: Book One

Mara Purl
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What the Heart Knows is an upbeat novel, billed by the author as "small town fiction," and the first book of Purl's Milford-Haven series.

The book opens powerfully with the appearance of the first of many strongly developed characters, Christine Christian. A television reporter, Christian is lured to the construction site of a controversial mansion-to-be with the promise of the inside scoop. Her fate remains unanswered in the pages that follow, until the reader discovers the prologue for book two generously included at the close of book one. Teasing mentions of the reporter keep one reading to find the answer.

What the Heart Knows is set in the mid-1990s, before the tidal wave of personal technology devices, social media, and the need to be "connected" 24/7. Purl does not use external paraphernalia to bring her characters to life. Instead, she creates genuine relationships that make sense within the story; each character has a clear set of goals and morals, all served up through dialogue and inner thought processes. Sound old-fashioned? It is. The author puts in the work so the reader does not need to Google each reference to stay on top of the story.

In a time of high unemployment and the resulting panic, it is also a pleasure to encounter characters that have profitable businesses and strong careers. Each person evolves through insightful internal dialogue written by the author and "spoken" during times when the characters are alone, reflective, and seriously mulling over their current situations and future plans.

Miranda the artist pokes through the cast as the most likable of the crew. She is creative, outdoorsy, and very concerned with the environment and animal welfare. Her thoughts while painting, sketching, or considering her work bring the reader deep inside her psyche and illuminate her seascapes and animal portraits. Of a cheetah named Lia who waits on the easel to be completed, Miranda says, "My job is to reveal her spirit, not to encase her in paint." This simple sentence conveys the values and vision of the artist both in her work and her life.

Sally O'Mally is the owner of the local breakfast spot where the residents of Milford-Haven meet for heart-to-heart conversations, drool over cinnamon buns, and catch up on local gossip. She is the most boisterous character, a smiling, seemingly happy woman. However, Sally harbors secrets, often spilling them out before she realizes she has opened her mouth. Her bubbly demeanor belies her sadness. Sally is involved in a clandestine affair with Jack Sawyer, the contractor for the mansion that is the plague of this otherwise idyllic coastal town. Sally wants the town to know about the romance, particularly when she learns that Jack's ex-wife is one of the well-respected locals.

The long roster of characters all have large roles in the story and the author kindly wrote a kind of glossary at the end of the book, including physical descriptions, jobs, and major ties to other characters. Multiple love stories, friendships, crushes, and storylines populate *What the Heart Knows*. The author keeps the romantic interactions to a PG-13 level, eschewing gratuitous sex, and nary an expletive muddies the dialogue.

Purl's characters are well-traveled, educated, and street smart. While she indulges in some clichés and predictable moments, these are redeemed in subsequent pages. For a prequel of book two in the series, *When Hummers Dream,* visit the author's website: www.marapurl.com*.*

DINDY YOKEL (December 13, 2011)

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