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How does a writer evolve? Is there a writing gene? Or is it those first English classes? If this were a multiple choice question on a schoolroom test, I'd pencil in "all of the above."

When we're children, quite effortlessly we metabolize our experiences, and they become part of our own fabric, the warp and woof of our souls. How fortunate, then, were those of us for whom ASIJ became a part of us. Those formative years in Japan were full of wonder, touching and changing me so much it is impossible to decipher which parts are oriental, which occidental. Sometimes it's obvious — I recorded a CD called *Koto Kist*, a collection of *koto* performances; my home is filled with Japanese screens and *tansu*; the colors I favor are *shibui*.

But I believe it's in my writing where the most subtle influences appear. It was in Japan I learned everyday language is a mask, concealing, rather than revealing what is actually being said between two people. Any of us who lived in Japan learned the word "no" is rude and thus seldom used. More complicated, however, was discerning exactly what was meant by the word "yes." "Yes, I won't be there." "Yes, I agree with you, this is not what we should do." "Yes, the weather is beautiful and this explains why I'm late."

Japan is a culture of subtext, and as a writer, this is my favorite realm. It's wonderful to give actors plenty of subtext in which to swim, a medium in which they can float their own memories and interpretations. It's sublime to balance text and subtext in fiction, painting clear pictures for the reader, but leaving him free to make his own associations as well.

My most valuable asset as a writer is my ability to read — the reading of behavior and of intention. Observing people closely, it becomes possible to see the multiple levels on which we're actually communicating. A glance away may mean something is very difficult to say; a shifting of position in a chair may mean the speaker is about to reveal something; a trembling lip may reveal great courage; a shaking hand extraordinary stress. As my characters meet and connect, these are the things I must actually see in order to be able to write them, whether in dialogue or description.

Too many words in a character's mouth can foil the action; a glance, a word delivered sleight-of-hand, can speak volumes. Gently, inexorably, like the proverbial

drops of water which finally penetrate the stone, Japan taught me that more can be less, and that less is so much more.

It was completely dark in the unfinished house. Chris shifted her foot.

A hundred feet below, the sea pounded. A tropical storm was traveling the South Pacific, and even this far north, the Central Coast was feeling the effects.

Somehow through the wind and crashing surf, she heard a noise. Clicking off her flashlight, she hugged her body close to the Sheetrock.

Clicking her flashlight back on, she began to search for stairs. There was nothing, however, but a ladder leading down into the hearth-well.

"There's a quick way down there, Ms. Christian."

"Uh! Oh, for Christ's sake, you just about scared the ... What the hell are you doing here?" Her heart pounded louder than the surf.

"I work here, Ms. Christian." The voice was steady, self-assured. The face seamed, it towered over a hulking physique.

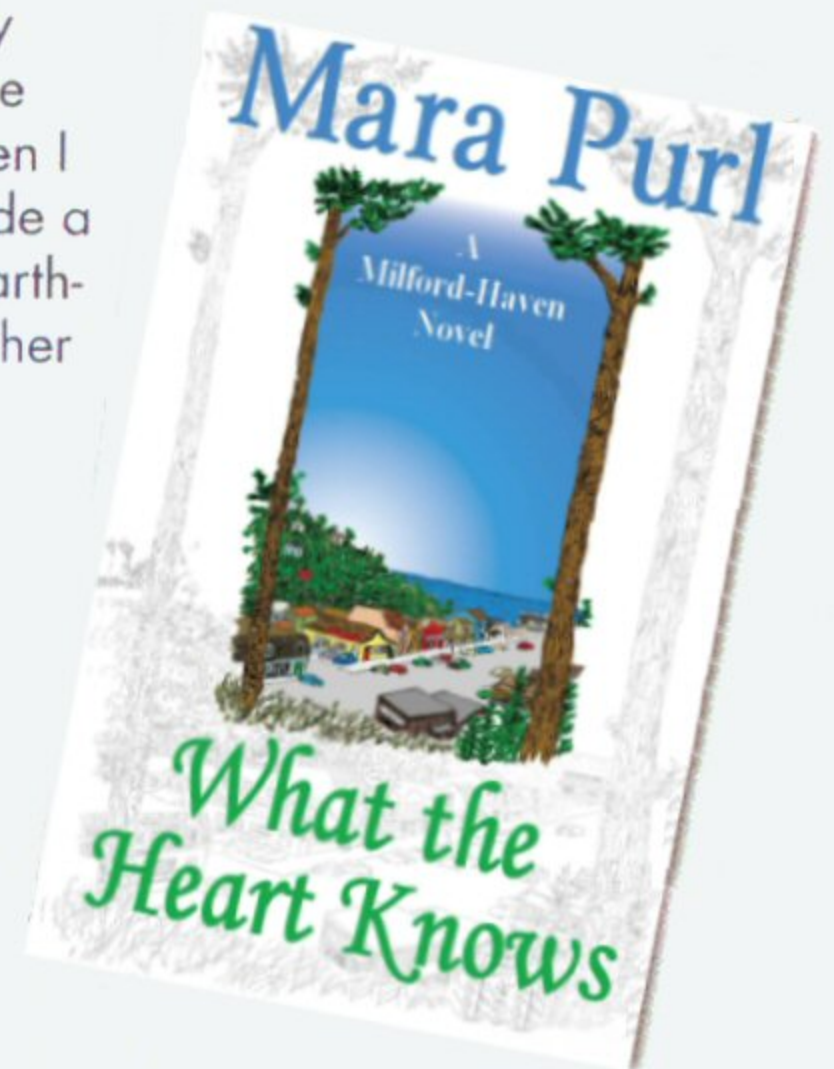
"Oh ... yes. I remember. Good thing you're here, because I could really use somehelp." The man said nothing.

"Well, listen, it's really getting late, and I'll come back in the morning when I can see better." She made a move away from the hearth-well, but it only brought her closer to the man.

It was now or never, she knew. He might be bigger, stronger, more massive, but maneuverability was on her side. She clicked off her flashlight and hurled it at him. In the sudden blackness she knew she'd have a second's worth of advantage.

She heard the crack first, before she felt the impact. Sounded like a gunshot, she thought. And the next sound she heard was someone's voice, as though from a great distance. It was screaming, screaming for help.

It'd been too many seconds since air had found its way into her lungs, and with a sudden clarity, she realized she wasn't breathing. In the same moment, Chris began to feel dirt pressing on her chest. Desperately, she inhaled, but she found no oxygen. Only the wet, sandy soil of the Central Coast.



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