

Julie Allinder
Special to the Jewish Times

Meet the
Hunters, a quirky,
neurotic Jewish family
living on Long Island.
Shelly, a 24-year-old law
school-bound Cornell grad
who's also anorexic, is
starving herself to death
and has checked into a New
York psychiatric hospital.
Older sister Franke is in a
depressive slump after a
series of bad professional
and personal moves, and
with her parents, she
works in a restaurant.

*strong
warnings*

**J
O
O
I
I
I**

A Slice
Of Art
And
Culture

■
IN PHOTO AT LEFT:
Through writing the
novel "Hunger Point,"
Jillian Medoff began to
understand her own
eating disorder.

Photo by Jerry Bauer

"Hunger Point" is a witty, often tragic debut for author Jillian Medoff.



Jillian Medoff: Her characters' emotions are autobiographical.

PHOTO BY JERRY BAUER

Mother Marsha, who's obsessed with food, her body and the size and shape of her daughters' bodies, uses Valium and an extra-marital affair with her boss to take the edge off. Mr. Hunter, a so-so-successful salesman who shuts down when it comes to dealing with his daughters' crises or his failing marriage, spends his time planning the family's next gourmet meal.

They sound pretty outrageous, yet believable. The Hunters are the core of Regan Books' "Hunger Point," an earthy, witty, penetrating first novel from Jillian Medoff, an Atlantan now working in New York. Medoff, a graduate of North Springs High School in Atlanta and Barnard College, has woven a tragic, yet sometimes hysterical tale of a rapidly disintegrating middle-class family struggling to deal with the eating disorder that's killing its most gifted member.

The story is told by Frannie Hunter, who experiences mixed emotions over her sister's self-wrought illness, while she tries desperately to stop her own downward spiral. These two sisters have little in common, other than their searches for ways to fill the voids in their lives.

Shelly is a bright, attractive over-achiever who, as a teenager, stuffs herself with Rice-a-Roni and hot honey sandwiches. In college, she discovers if she makes herself throw up after pigging out, she can eat all she wants and stay thin. When Frannie confronts her, Shelly rather proudly describes her bulimic behavior as "discipline."

While Shelly seeks comfort in food, Frannie uses sex. Frannie spends her college years sleeping with "Rat Boys," sometimes not liking them or even knowing their names.

Medoff, 33, says her debut novel is not autobiographical, but many of the characters' emotions are her own.

Medoff's family settled in Atlanta after moving 17 times, and she has suffered from both anorexia nervosa and bulimia since adolescence. Years of alternately starving herself and bingeing and purging, Medoff says, "wasted her body" and "exhausted her spirit."

Like the character Shelly, the author has been hospitalized for her eating disorder and has un-

dergone therapy.

Jillian Medoff is a graduate of the writing program at New York University. She has taught at both NYU and the University of Georgia.

Writing "Hunger Point," which took three years, was cathartic, she says. The reader senses that in what seems an honest, firsthand account of a young woman's painful self-discovery.

"It was unbelievable," Medoff says in a phone interview, "how I started to make associations with the book that I had never made in real life. I understood intellectually the connections between poor self-es-

essed with weight. This negative fixation conveyed the same dissatisfaction to her daughters.

In a society that's so obsessed with body image, weight and food, it shouldn't be surprising that many

teen and my eating disorder and my proclivity for seeking out guys who were weak and not very nice to me, but it wasn't until I got into the characters' heads that I was able to see the big picture. I really understand things now in ways I never did before."

Like her characters, Medoff also grew up with a mother who was ob-

young women feel pressure to conform to what's presented as the ideal: Thin is beautiful, good, *in*. But Medoff believes eating disorders which affect about 5 percent of American college women, are the result of more complex factors.

"In my experience, eating disorders have nothing, or at least very little to do with food. They have much more to do with low self-esteem which is manifested in a need for control," Medoff says. "To me Shelly's problem is so much about choice and not being heard. I think her eating disorder and mine are about internalizing so much rage and anger and taking it out on our selves, as opposed to venting it."

The author believes the true underlying problem for women like Shelly is confusion over mixed messages and a resulting depression "Girls are told they have all these options. They can be a Supreme Court justice and they can do this and that, but everything seems to get reduced when they read magazines or go to the movies and it's the very thin woman with the pretty hair who ends up with the guy and lives happily ever after."

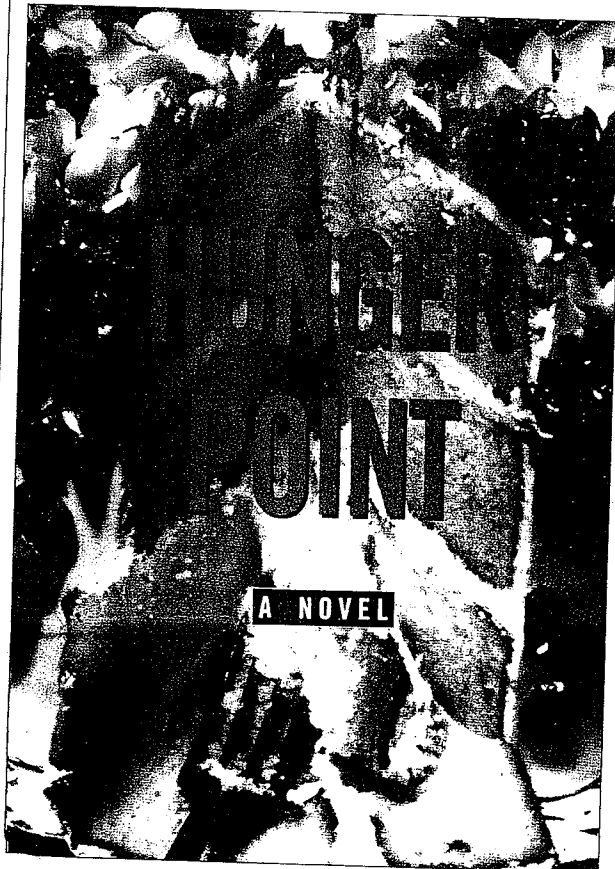
Medoff points to an identity vacuum, a lack of self, that is much more common among girls than boys, as are eating disorders.

In "Hunger Point," that voice brings Shelly's life to a tragic end. Medoff says, in her case, it took years of therapy to develop a self and finally discover the woman she is today.

"It took a long time for me to realize that I had choices and some one to believe in and take care of. I didn't take care of myself. I took care of everything else" — a trait Medoff says is common among Jewish women who are taught early to put self aside and be caretakers.

While Hollywood and fashion magazines will always present thinness as the ideal, Medoff believes that many women are becoming more enlightened about their bodies, and self-worth.

"Because of them the next generation is going to be much healthier and much more aware of what's going on," the author says. "I believe our daughters will be better off."



Jillie Allinder is an Atlanta writer.