

FIRST RUN

Arts & Entertainment

Jillian Medoff: Gains & Losses

By Bridget LeRoy

"Don't ask for what you want, you will surely get it." Most readers are familiar with the phrase, and so are some writers. Jillian Medoff, a 33-year-old New York City resident, is getting a lot of attention for her first novel, *Hunger Point* (HarperCollins), a book about a woman obsessed with losing weight, who finally gains what she needs the most — the tools to help her take control of her own life.

During a phone interview in which the book was complimented, Medoff was grateful but added that she was "so wiped out, anything feels good." Because of the limited amount of publicity that usually accompanies a first book, Medoff had embarked on a one-woman PR campaign of her own, and has "over-extended" herself.

"I pushed and pushed and pushed, and finally had a sort of mini-break-down last week," she offered candidly. "I was standing in Barnes & Noble, crying, because they didn't have a sign above my book," she laughed. "My mother said, 'You have to do something.' I got to the point where the most unimportant things were taking on such significance, I have to kind of step back for a minute."

Montauk Connection

Her exhaustion is bringing the author to the wonderfully hedonistic Gurney's Inn for a weekend of indulgence. "I'm not the kind of person who normally does things like this," she said. "I feel just like Jackie Collins." Medoff readily admitted that "I think about all the other things I could be doing, rather than sitting in a mudbath. Like writing my next book so people will like me."

Never being one to say "no," she will also host a reading and a book-signing on Saturday at 4 p.m. at Gurney's Inn. "Do you think anyone will show up?" she asked. I assured her that there would be at least one person there.

Medoff is a newcomer to the "world of the interview," and right from the get-go came across as friendly, helpful, anything but jaded. "People are telling me I have to stop being so truthful in interviews," she admitted. "But what have I got to hide?"

Medoff has also taught writing at the college level. Did she teach "write what you know"?

"Actually, I didn't," she said. "I taught 'write what you don't know about what you know.' In other words, take an experience that you know and write about it from another person's point of view. I think when you only write about what you know, it becomes too close to home. You lose your objectivity. And the craft of fiction should encompass as much imagination as possible."

Hunger Point is a case of Medoff doing what she teaches. The book focuses

on sisters Frannie and Shelly, the older one the underachiever, the younger one the perfect daughter. Shelly, a Cornell graduate, is going to Harvard Law School. She is her parents' favorite, but she has a serious eating disorder which eventually leads to her death, and total domestic chaos. The story of this dysfunctional Long Island family (based in the fictitious Lindsey Point) is told through Frannie's eyes, when, in fact, Medoff herself suffered from anorexia and bulimia.

Huge Breasts

"It's not a memoir," Medoff was quick to explain. "Personally, I think it's a little weird when a 30-something woman writes a memoir. Unless you're Madame Curie. Then you can write your memoir."

"I mean, yes, there are autobiographical elements in my book — I did have an eating disorder, I was hospitalized several times — but I moved 17 times, I never lived in one place like the family in the book."

"I also chose to tell the story of a woman with an eating disorder from her sister's point of view," she continued. "I always wondered what my sisters thought about my eating disorder, and it makes for a much more interesting story that way, I think."

Food is the glue that binds together the family in the novel. The first line — "Look at these breasts. They're huge!" — a reference to the chicken dish on the table — sets the tone for the darkly humorous tale which follows. The father reads cookbooks like they're going out of style, the mother, a control freak, only feeds her two daughters sugar-free candies, teaches them to take the skin off their poultry, and takes Frannie to her first Weight Watchers meeting at the age of 10.

Rave Reviews

"Frannie, you're getting fat," my mom said solemnly. "You're too pretty to be heavy. You want boys to like you, don't you?" The word *fat* assumed a meaning deadly as cancer. Getting *fat* was worse than losing your job, worse than being jilted at the altar, worse than living in a trailer park and growing up without shoes."

In spite of the heavy subject, *Hun-*



Jillian Medoff, author of *Hunger Point*, will read at Gurney's Inn this Saturday at 4 p.m.

ger Point is a humorous book in some ways, with Frannie as an expert, if self-deprecating, raconteur. "I'm not as funny as she is," lamented the author.

"But you wrote the book," I pointed out as gently as possible.

"Yeah, I know," Medoff said. "But I'm only funny when I move into the page. In real life, I'm not that funny."

Reviews of the book have been stel-

lar. "Jillian Medoff writes with bone-scraping clarity, pitiless insight, and vast, almost shameless humor," wrote Diane Roberts for *The Atlanta Journal*. "This fine first novel is so winning and funny, you'll laugh instead of cry," said *Mademoiselle* magazine. Similar raves abound in *Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus*, *Glamour* magazine, and this week's *People* magazine, currently on the stands (the one with JonBenet Ramsey on the cover).

Getting Better

When did Medoff finally get cured? "I don't know if I am," Medoff replied. "For me, it wasn't just about the food, it was about the self-destructive things I did with men [whom Frannie refers to as 'rat boys'], the way I felt about myself, about my body. I just hated myself."

"What finally enabled me to start liking myself, and therefore develop healthy eating habits, was moving to New York City. Taking a risk. Taking a leap of faith, committing myself to therapy and my own fiction."

She confessed that recently, when meeting with some movie people interested in *Hunger Point* (and there is tons of interest in this three-week-old novel), she walked into the meeting "and the first thing I thought was, 'My God, I'm the fattest person in the room.' It's sick."

Medoff's new book, anything but lean, will provide readers with food for thought.

Jillian Medoff will read from *Hunger Point* and sign copies of her book on Saturday at 4 p.m. at Gurney's Inn on Old Montauk Highway in Montauk.

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