

Winning Battle With Eating Disorders Leads to First Novel

By BARBARA KAPLAN LANE

JILLIAN MEDDOFF doesn't look like a person who spent nearly a decade of her young life as a nose-cannoe woman who repeatedly damaged her body and soul with drugs, pathological eating disorders and hysterics with her own men, including other women's husbands. But then, Ms. Meddoff has been through a lot of changes in the last 10 years — from a budding loner who corrected elaborate suicide scenarios while staring nervously into the eyes of a doctor who considered her self "fun, even in my neuroses."

Unlike the sophisticated photograph on the cover of her first novel, "Hunger Point," published this month by Harper Collins, the real Ms. Meddoff, 33, looks neither older nor more worldly than a college student who has spent too long in the book stacks. Baby-pink lips stick out in the only makeup visible on Ms. Meddoff's fair skin, her brilliant blue eyes providing the only other color in a face framed by flyaway dark hair. She wore a boxy blazer and shapeless slacks, a costume that gave little clue to the dimensions of the body within, which has fluctuated wildly between 125 and 180 pounds.

A compulsive overachiever, as women prone to eating disorders typically are, Ms. Meddoff arrived for her meeting some 20 minutes early, equipped with a bundle of reading material to fill every spare moment. The interview took place at a restaurant and lasted four hours, well past lunch. Tantalizing aromas wafted all around, but Ms. Meddoff declined all but black coffee, saying she had had a big breakfast.

According to the National Eating Disorders Organization in Tulsa, Okla., "making excuses to skip meals and not eating with others" and "highly self-controlled behavior" are two warning signs of eating disorders. Nevertheless, Ms. Meddoff said her food problems are under control.

As for the latter characteristic, Ms. Meddoff certainly is a person of formidable self-discipline. She wrote "Hunger Point" on a strict, self-imposed schedule at night and on weekends while working full-time as a corporate writer for the accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche, where she remains employed. Although she recently cut back her hours to allow more time for writing fiction, she has no intention of giving up her day job despite her literary success.

"Hunger Point" has already achieved a measure of commercial success. Before its actual publication, Regency/Regency Vision Productions bought the movie rights, and a film of the novel is scheduled for release in early 1998. The book has received

favorable notices in Publisher's Weekly, Kristus Review and Paper, a hip downtown Manhattan monthly, and has been featured in Vanity Fair and Glamour magazine.

"Hunger Point" is the story of a dysfunctional Jewish family in the fictitious North Shore village of Lindsey Point, which feels remarkably like Great Neck, told from the point of view of Frankie Hunter, a neurotic but likable 26-year-old woman who is by turns wry, depressed, pathetic and feisty. Although she is not exactly the girl next door, she could easily be the woman in the next stall at Loehmann's.

Fired for the unimpeachable time in her brief career, Frankie has just moved back in with her parents when her younger sister, Shelly, 24, is hospitalized for anorexia. Soon after, Shelly is discharged, she commits suicide, sending Frankie on a downward spiral of anorexia, desperate sexual encounters, depression and a brush with suicide. The novel is Frankie's semi-picaresque odyssey from self-loathing to self-acceptance and sanity.

The author of 'Hunger Point' says she considers herself 'fun,' even in my neuroses.

"Hunger Point" is recklessly candid as perhaps only a first novel, as well as its author, can be. "I have nothing to hide," Ms. Meddoff said. "I haven't developed a public personality yet. I debated a lot about how gritty and honest to make the book. When I write I'm completely uninhibited; there's no euphemism. The point was not for me to be shocking but to be honest. There's always that elephant in the living room. It was always cloaked but, always there — that disconnection among all of us and between my parents."

"I internalized everything," she continued. "There were complete fantasy worlds that I lived in. Nobody in my family talked certainly not about my eating disorder. I would go from 125 pounds to 180 within six months. Every year I would binge and binge and then I would starve, and no one would say anything."

She was concerned about her family's reaction to the book. "I was ambivalent

about giving them the book to read," she said. "As an eldest daughter, used to being the caretaker, I was worried about how they would take it. There's a contract you make as a family. You don't break the silence of the dirty laundry, the anger, the lack of money. It's shameful for parents who are unable to give their children what they expected to. We never talked for anything but we always lived with the fear that it would be taken away. I was very afraid that my mother would look at the mother in the book and feel betrayed. My mother's not like her — she's been in therapy and is much kinder and very evolved."

Fortunately, her family warmed to the book. "My parents are 100 percent behind me now," Ms. Meddoff said. "My father, a salesman for Henckel knives, takes press kits with him on road trips. My mother wanted to make T-shirts of the book cover. They are unbelievably proud. The irony is that my success is rooted in breaking the silence. It has opened up dialogue between me and my sisters, but we still don't talk about that time."

Ms. Meddoff balks at calling the novel autobiographical, but concedes many parallels between events in the book and in her own life, as well as between Frankie's and Shelly's personalities and her own. Although the characters and situations are all composites or inventions, their sources were very close to home.

"Writing this was tremendously cathartic," she said. "The things I can't work out in my life I work out in my fiction. Writing it helps me understand my life. I write to understand. The only way I can see my emotions clearly is by writing. It was very painful, but I also got a lot of joy out of it. I would have been able to sustain it for four years if I didn't get back."

Even the very togetherness of Ms. Meddoff's life constitute a source of material. Her father's career necessitated 17 moves in Ms. Meddoff's lifetime — to and from Forest Hills three times, twice each to Atlanta and Holy Wood, Fla., with stops at Dallas, Cleveland, Detroit, Buffalo, Syracuse, Manhattan, Marietta, N.J., and Long Beach, Calif. The family never stayed put for longer than 18 months at a time, a factor the author associates with her continuing difficulty in sustaining relationships.

Although she spent less than a year living on Long Island, Ms. Meddoff has deep ties to the area, with family in Hewlett, Port Washington, Kings Point and Sands Point and a definite preference for the island sensibility, at least as a literary device.

"There's something about the ironic sense of humor, unlike the superior, holier-



Jillian Meddoff, author of a new novel, "Hunger Point."

than-thou Manhattan sense of humor," Ms. Meddoff explained. "It's sometimes self-deprecating, sometimes antagonistic. There's an alertness, a quickness you don't find in other suburbs. I wrote this with the North Shore and the Five Towns in mind. There's just an edge to this community. It's a way of dealing with life as well as a way of keeping theatrical sort of living here."

Her own life could hardly have been more dramatic. Ms. Meddoff was anorexic by the time she was 12.

"I always saw myself as a freak, but I wanted to be different because it made me special," the author recalled. "Being gifted and being anorexic made me different and that's what I wanted to be."

She became bulimic at 15 and remained so for more than 10 years. Along the way, she was misdiagnosed as manic-depressive bordering on schizophrenia and was inappropriately medicated. She abused the medications prescribed for her depression and sought solace in a series of flings with men, some of them married.

"I look back at the person I was five, six years ago and I feel ashamed, but that's not me now," Ms. Meddoff said. "It was such a

horrible period of my life. I was never in it for the man to leave his wife. It was just a way of getting filled up, making a connection any way that I could. For me it was a way to have sex with a limited commitment. Men aren't the only ones who can't make commitments."

Despite her inner turmoil, she not only carried on, for years, the appearances of a normal life, but also had an exemplary career, earning at Revlon while an undergraduate at Barnard and moving on shortly after graduation to marketing writer and analyst first at Max Factor, then Fabergé. While working full-time, she attended the acclaimed graduate fiction writing program at New York University. It was a grueling schedule: two years of eight-hour workdays followed by three nights a week of five-hour classes and seminars and eight more hours of classes on Saturdays. Somehow she pushed herself through it while maintaining a good front.

"I had a completely secret life," Ms. Meddoff recalled. "No one knew how sick I was. Now I'm putting this very private part of my life in a public place."

She hopes the frankness of "Hunger Point" will help dash some of the myths behind eating disorders as well as the bludgeoning silence that surrounds it and other forms of mental illness. Ms. Meddoff, who hopes to have a family one day, said she would tell her own daughter: "You're even only one opportunity at life. You're worth believing in, but you have to be the one to take responsibility. I can help you filter out the mixed signals, but ultimately it's up to you. You have choices."

With the help of therapy, a supportive family, modern psychopharmacology, a sense of humor and her own formidable desire to heal herself, Ms. Meddoff is making some choices of her own. The point of the book is that Frankie is just now beginning to understand who she is, Ms. Meddoff said.

"Frankie still has to do what I'm doing now. I'm still not finished. I've come to terms with it, I understand it and I forgive myself. I've had years of 'God, what was I thinking?' I feel that I can now tap into a level of compassion and kindness that I never had when I was ill. I like myself very much now. I'd take myself out. I'm a lot of fun, I'm even fun in my neuroses."

"I'm very pleased and proud of myself for not falling into a lot of traps that I could fall into with all the publicity and attention that I'm getting. I'm totally present in my life. My life is rich and full of possibility. I'd like a man in my life, but I don't have to have one. And I've never had that feeling before."