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Correction Appended

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HEADLINE: LI IN LITERATURE: GATSBY AND BEYOND

BYLINE: BY PHIL MINTZ. STAFF WRITER

BODY:

WHEN JILLIAN MEDOFF, who moved 17 times while growing up, decided on a setting for her recently published first novel, "Hunger Point," she turned to Long Island, where she had once lived for six months.

In the novel, Medoff creates the fictitious Lindsey Point, a community close to Great Neck both in geography and lifestyle and the focal point for her story of a 26-year-old woman who is coming to terms with her younger sister's eating disorder. Now a Manhattanite, Medoff says the choice of Long Island for her book was an easy one.

"I think the thing about the Island that gives it such a unique sensibility is that it's so close to New York," says Medoff, who has relatives living in Nassau County. "It has a witty, gritty sense of irony that you don't find in many suburbs. You grow up very fast on Long Island because it's so close to New York." popular with fiction writers for just that reason. The Island has been the backdrop for some great and not-so-great novels, including one classic, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," and best-sellers such as Peter Benchley's East End tale of shark terror, "Jaws," and "Naked Came the Stranger," the 1969 sex-in-the-suburbs spoof purportedly written by Long Island housewife "Penelope Ashe" but actually produced by 25 Newsday staffers.

"I think Long Island is incredibly diverse for a land mass this small. Go to the Midwest and drive through Kansas and Oklahoma and it's pretty much the same," says best-selling author Nelson DeMille, who has written four books set on Long Island, including "The Gold Coast," which has gone through 15 printings since it was published in 1990. A new DeMille novel, "Plum Island," set on the North Fork, is to be published soon. "I've lived here all my life and I find this place extremely rich in raw materials for a novelist," adds DeMille, who grew up in Elmont and now lives in Garden City. "It has a three-hundred-year history."

Susan Isaacs, author of "Compromising Positions" and three other novels set on Long Island, agrees. "Long Island offers the universe," she says. "Because of its richness, it's so alive. Maybe North Dakota is alive, but not to me."

John Westermann, a retired Freeport police officer who has published four "police procedural" novels, all set on Long Island, agrees there's plenty for a writer to work with.

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"Long Island politics and the criminal justice system are endlessly entertaining," says the Setauket resident, whose most recent book, "The Honor Farm," was published in December. "It would be more commercially viable to write cop novels about New York City, but I have absolutely no interest in doing that. I just think Long Island is interesting as hell."

A survey published by the Suffolk County Cooperative Library System in 1993 lists approximately 200 books of fiction set here, some dating John Steinbeck's "The Winter of Our Discontent," published in 1961, a year before the novelist was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. There's also less durable fare, such as "Fire Island," Burt Hirshfeld's 1970 antics-in-the-sand potboiler, and Alice Hoffman's 1980 book, "Angel Landing," a love story involving a therapist in the fictional town of Fishers Cove and a welder at a nuclear power plant.

The literary touchstone for Long Island, critics generally agree, is "Gatsby," which Fitzgerald began when he lived at 6 Gateway Dr. in Great West Egg, where Jay Gatsby lived, parallels Great Neck and Kings Point, while the ritzier East Egg of the book, the home of Daisy and Tom Buchanan, is actually Sands Point on the Port Washington peninsula.

"Fitzgerald's close friend was Ring Lardner. Lardner lived next door to a big mansion owned by the publisher of the New York World. CORRECTION: During the 1920s, the writer Ring Lardner lived next door to the editor of the New York World. An article on Long Island fiction in Sunday's LI LIFE misstated the neighbor's position at the newspaper. (A02 NS 3/11/97). Lardner's house was much smaller," says Ruth Prigozy, an English professor at Hofstra University and executive director of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Society. "Fitzgerald and Lardner used to sit at

For many readers, Prigozy says, the Long Island of "The Great Gatsby" still has resonance, even though it no longer exists. Gatsby is read all over the world, and the world knows Long Island through it, she says.

When and where Long Island's next "Gatsby" will come from is hard to say. While many writers live on the East End and in other Long Island communities, not all choose to write about it. In fact, some authors, such as DeMille, think Long Island is underrepresented when it comes to fiction.

"This is the era of the regional novel, and Long Island is not a region because it's so small and it's always been an appendage of New York," says DeMille.

Isaacs doesn't agree about Long Island being underrepresented, but she says some writers may be shying away from writing about it since "it's replaced Brooklyn as the butt of third-rate humor. To that degree, people who want to be chic won't write about it. So big deal, they write about Westchester."

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GRAPHIC: Newsday Photo by Audrey C. Tiernan-From the ridiculous (Naked Came the Stranger) to the sublime (The Great Gatsby)

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