
Jillian Medoff

Hunger Point
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A Conversation with Jillian Medoff

***Hunger Point* is an incredibly powerful novel about a young woman's struggle to come to terms with her sister's eating disorder, and how it forever changes her and her family. Where did you get the idea for the story?**

I had a preoccupation with my weight from the time I was a kid, which developed into anorexia at 12 and bulimia from 14 on. In my early 20's, I was hospitalized twice. My eating disorder wasted my body physically and emotionally. I was depressed, angry and confused. After years of therapy, I rebuilt myself. Or, more to the point, I discovered the woman I am now, who doesn't even remotely resemble the girl I was then. I had to develop an entire self.

As far as characterization, Shelly's story is closest to my own, but it was the entire family that really intrigued me. So much goes on in this family! I met Grace Paley who suggested that I write what I don't know about what I know, which really resonated for me. So I began to really get to know Frannie, who is hipper, funnier, and more fearless than I could ever hope to be. Many people think I'm Frannie, but I'm not. Books are funny that way. The story is not my story per se, but most of the emotional tension and dynamics are mine. In other words, I've had different experiences than my characters, but I can empathize with how they feel and why they act — and react — the way they do.

***Hunger Point* offers a provocative look at a problem that affects countless women: the loss of self. Shelly loses herself in anorexia, while Frannie loses herself in men. Why do you think so many women suffer from a loss of self? Why do you think loss of self seems to be manifested in eating disorders more often in women than in men?**

I've read a lot about the issue of the self — feminist theory, psychology, even religious ideology. An overriding factor that emerged is that women are given many mixed messages as children, and the imprints last long into adulthood. I believe that the self is a continually emerging and changing entity, but it needs a strong foundation to survive and flourish.

My own experience is that I was told to be independent and work hard and become a Supreme Court Justice, but I was shown by magazines, television, and movies, that I had to be thin and beautiful and I must — by any means necessary — find a man. So, in truth, my foundation was shaky to begin with and as I got older, I became more confused until I was whirling in an emotional vortex that was the result of an incredible void. I developed a coping mechanism — albeit a very destructive one — to fill this void, and while my eating disorder enabled me to function in the world, I paid a high price for it.

I wouldn't say that many women suffer a loss of self; I think many women don't have a self to begin with — or rather, their "self" isn't fully developed, so they use external means to define it. The truth is that many women have an internal void, which is why they feel empty or unworthy and end up with inappropriate men or unhealthy coping mechanisms.

In terms of why women end up with eating disorders, I think there is a lot of pressure in our society to be thin. I support that's a cliché already, but aesthetic perfection has become a standard by which we measure ourselves and each other. Food is easy to abuse because you have to eat (unlike alcohol, which you can give up completely), it tastes good, and it is the basis for a lot of social interaction. When you feel you have no control over your life, you can control how much you ingest, which can give you a false sense of order. Like any other addiction, it can get out of hand when the behavior itself becomes the factor that defines you. I think women are subject to intense scrutiny about their bodies, which is why it may appear that eating disorders are manifested in women more so than men, but men too have their issues with food and body image. It's just not discussed as much.

***Hunger Point* thoughtfully tells the story of a young woman's battle with anorexia, while pointing out — and brilliantly deriding — society's obsession with food and dieting. Do you think society's thinness obsession will ever taper off?**

Not for awhile. The thinness issue is inextricably linked to the standards of beauty we currently uphold, as well as to our country's obsession with fitness. The former is the mood of our culture, and the latter is a good idea taken to a very dangerous extreme. Throughout history, different cultures — including our own — have upheld heaviness as a symbol of beauty, wealth and status. Then these standards began to shrink and keeping up with them has become a daily battle. It's like the entire country is engaged in a mad tango with our weight. We love to eat rich foods, but then we have to make up for it, and it's filtered to our children who see us grappling with eating potato chips: should I? shouldn't I? what are the consequences? Sometimes you have to take a step back and say "it's only food," but when you're doing the dance, it's so difficult to see clearly, and the battle assumes a life all its own. Furthermore, it's a battle you'll never win until you realize that the dance is about much more than just the potato chips.

The only way society's thinness obsession is on an individual level, but that takes a strength not supported by media images or current standards of beauty. Believing you're beautiful and successful regardless of your weight is a tough concept to internalize. Even after all I've learned about myself, I still sometimes focus on my weight. Last month, I was in a meeting with Regency Productions, the studio making the movie of *Hunger Point*. The director, the screenwriter, and the producers were raving about the book and all I could think was, "Oh my God, I'm the fattest person in this room. Do they think I'm the fattest person in this room?" I'd give a body part to be able to wear low-slung Levi's and long, straight dresses because they look great on Sharon Stone, but I'm not built like Sharon Stone. And I have to tell myself, actually talk out loud, and say that maybe that's not such a tragedy, that maybe I can love myself for what I am and not hate myself for what I'm not. I have stopped my bulimic behavior, but I still default sometimes to my fat-thinking, not because it makes me feel good, but it's familiar, and as destructive as it is, I can block out all my worries by focusing on the size of my thighs. And once the music in my head starts to play, I can dance for days.

What was the most difficult thing about writing *Hunger Point*?

There were many. One was fitting the book into my life, then once I crossed over into the parallel universe of the fictitious world I created, I had to fit my life into the book. I worked full-time as I wrote the book, and being wickedly obsessive, I had a schedule: get up, go to work, go to the gym, go home, and write three nights a week and all day Saturday. *No deviations*. With this schedule came many, many compromises. I had to give up intimate relationships because I was sleeping with this wonderful, incredibly consuming book. And sometimes the book didn't give back — there were times when I felt I was writing in this abyss. It was lonely and frustrating, especially since the only payoff was the writing itself, and sometimes that payoff isn't immediate. You have days when you're struggling to create, and then you have other moments (rarely days) when the vision is clear, the characters are alive, and the moment is sublime.

The other thing that was difficult was my own visceral reaction to the material. As I got deeper into the book, I started learning so much about myself and it was very painful. I cried a lot for my characters in ways I never cried for myself. I also had to take these characters who I cared about and allow bad things to happen to them, which was risky, both as a writer and a woman.

Finally, the mechanics of writing a novel is very complicated, and you only begin to realize how complicated once you're already committed. I wasn't writing to get published, I was writing because I had to get the story out, so most of the time, I was forced to find my way by instinct. Also, I write "on the page," without outlines, so my storylines unfolded as I got to know my characters. This meant writing countless scenes that readers will never see, just so I could become totally immersed in who they are.

This book was like a first love affair, and like first love, it is fueled by reckless abandon and honesty. But despite its emotional pull, I was determined to have it be structurally sound with full-rendered characters. Writing is a craft, and the only way to strengthen your skill set is to edit and revise. I wrote at least seven drafts of a finished manuscript even before it was purchased. Then I wrote two more. I made so many mistakes, but I kept going, and I learned a lot about the process, which was worth all the compromises. I suspect my next novel will be a different experience, but I'm becoming a better writer, which is what this is all about, which is why I do it.

Please elaborate on the movie interest in *Hunger Point*.

Not so ironically, the producers at Regency are very strong, capable women who fought for the book. The men didn't want to deal with what they considered "food issues," which they said wouldn't sell. But Alexandra and Elinor Milchan showed the book to their assistants and there was an uprising in the company where all the women were saying this isn't about food, it's about us, about how we live, the mistakes we make, the way we feel.

The screenwriter has already finished a draft of the script, which will be reviewed, then sent to potential actresses. It's happening fast, and while there is always the prospect that the movie won't be made. *Hunger Point* has become their "passion project." In fact, Alexandra told me that she was going to do whatever it takes to get this movie made. The producers are so enthusiastic, they want to start shooting in the Spring for release in 1998. They're delirious about the movie, which is a pretty heady thing for me. Personally, it's very validating, but completely unexpected.

What training in writing do you have?

I studied with some amazing writers in college — Robert Coover, Alice Walker, Joy Chute, and graduated from Barnard with a degree in English and an unfinished novel as my senior thesis. Then I went into business and over the years I became a corporate writer. I was writing at night, but I wanted to learn more, so I took a giant leap of faith, quit my job in Atlanta, came back to New York, and went to NYU's Graduate Writing School, where I fell in love with my book. I can't believe it's actually being published. For awhile, all I wanted to do was finish, and now to think that it's going to be in print is so amazing. Currently, I work a reduced schedule at Deloitte & Touche, a Big Six Accounting Firm as a marketing writer. Deloitte has been very supportive of my novel, and the two types of writing actually strengthen each other: the technical writing demands discipline, as well as expertise in structure, brevity, and clarity, and the fiction writing helps me survive the technical writing.

What was it like to move 17 times?

Grueling, although I didn't realize how grueling until recently. The moving was a result of recurring money problems in my family. I was a very isolated, insecure kid and the constant upheaval really shook me up. It made me fiercely independent and driven to succeed in something so that I won't ever have to live that way as an adult, but as the "new girl" I felt I was always on show, which made me obsessed with my weight and appearance. Eventually, I found solace on the page, which is where I am most comfortable.

What's interesting about moving was the way it affected my relationships with my two sisters. Not only did we fight about regular sister stuff, but we were also very competitive about who could make friends and who couldn't, who had plans and who was excluded. On the other hand, moving enabled us to bond in ways that other sister never do because so much of the time, all we had was each other. We're very tight now, and I thank God every day that I have them.

What's next for you? Frannie is such a funny, original, irresistible character. Might she turn up in your future work?

The blank page. Actually, I've been working on a new book, which explores relationships from the point of view of a man who works in the breast implant industry (I was a medical writer in the mid-eighties). I am also taking notes for a sequel to *Hunger Point*, in which Frannie turns 30 and she and Abby are both married with kids, but I won't be able to write that story for awhile. I'm 33, single, and have no children, so I want to wait until I can get perspective. But imagine a series like Updike's Rabbit Angstrom. Frannie and Abby with strollers? Frannie and Abby at Canyon Ranch? Abby's third divorce settlement? Frannie and Charlie as grandparents? Frannie and Abby in a nursing home? Endless possibilities — that's what I feel like I have. Endless possibilities.