

To Die For

In Chelsea Cain's novel, a detective is obsessed by the woman who nearly killed him.

HEARTSICK

By Chelsea Cain.
326 pp. St. Martin's Minotaur. \$23.95.

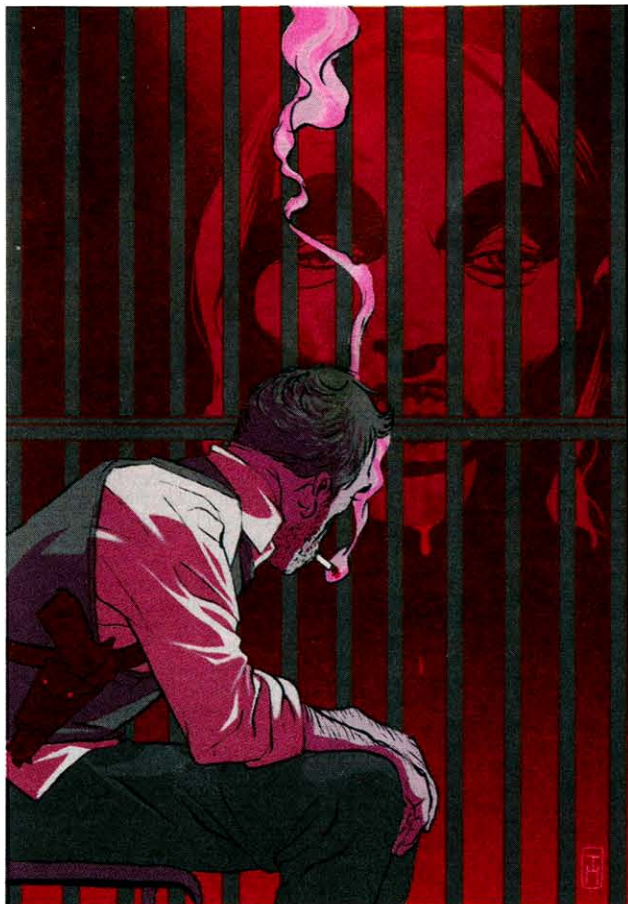
By KATHRYN HARRISON

AILEEN WUORNOS. Blanche Moore. Velma Barfield. Granted, mug shots don't command the services of stylists and makeup artists, and the lighting down at the precinct is probably fluorescent, but the average female serial killer is no drop-dead beauty. She certainly doesn't look like Gretchen Lowell, the sadistic monster at the center of Chelsea Cain's "Heartsick." Blond Gretchen's eyes are "large and pale blue and her features ... perfectly symmetrical." She has "wide cheekbones, a long sculpted nose, a heart-shaped face" and a "long, aristocratic neck." So overwhelming are Gretchen's charms that Archie Sheridan, the police detective she tortured to death and then revived, still fantasizes about her, slipping his fingers inside his shirt when no one's looking to trace the valentine-shaped scar she carved into his chest with an X-Acto knife.

One of the challenges for the thriller writer who takes on the catch-the-serial-killer subgenre is the ever escalating ante, one author's diabolically perverse criminal demanding the next's invention of a murderer just that much more diabolical and perverse. In Gretchen Lowell, Cain has created a femme fatale with an appetite for cruelty that will be difficult to surpass. Gretchen is hammering nails into Archie's ribs when we meet her in the opening flashback; now she's in jail entertaining weekly visits from him. Archie returns to his would-be killer's side in hopes of learning where she dumped her victims. Just how many people did she murder before he caught her? But, no, wait — wasn't it she who caught him? "Gretchen was in prison. And Archie was free. Funny. Sometimes it still felt like the other way around."

The formula of an ambitious but damaged cop who becomes emotionally entangled with a brilliant psychopath who manipulates him or her from behind bars belongs to Thomas Harris, whose Hannibal Lecter has become the model for the subgenre's twisted genius. But Cain makes an adjustment to the central cast Harris featured in "The Silence of the Lambs" — a jailed serial killer, an F.B.I. special agent, his protégé and an active killer — subtracting one cop and adding a journalist. Susan Ward, assigned by The Oregon Herald to write a series of articles profiling Archie Sheridan, renowned for stopping if not exactly outsmarting Gretchen Lowell, tags along to murder scenes and takes notes on her subject and his methods. Although the ending will reveal a more integral, punch-line kind of connection, most of the novel uses Susan's reporting as the intersection — beyond Archie's traumatic memories of being tortured — between Gretchen's halted career as a serial killer and the new series of brutal murders that has put an end to the leave of absence Archie took in the wake of Gretchen's savagery. Someone is kidnapping teenage girls from Portland. "He kills them," Archie says, reviewing the predator's M.O. "He sexually assaults them.

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Tomer Hanuka

And he soaks them in a tub of bleach until he decides to dump them."

Cain weaves the two narratives together cleverly, interrupting the detective's pursuit of the current murderer with flashbacks to Gretchen's relentless and at times nauseating ministrations to Archie's naked body, strapped to a gurney in a basement outfitted like an operating theater with "medical-looking machinery, a drain on the cement floor." As told from Archie's point of view, his focus blurred by pain, occasional losses of consciousness, the stench of a putrefying corpse nearby and the "medicine" Gretchen forces down his throat with a funnel, the torture scenes are erotic, if you like that kind of thing. Gretchen appears as an angel of death, speaking in a bedroom "voice just above a whisper," calling Archie her "darling," smelling of lilacs and running "her fingertips lightly along the skin of his arm." The French may refer to an orgasm as "la petite mort," but a lust murderer coming off a 10-year spree requires a bigger and more definitive climax. "Whatever you think this is going to be like," Gretchen coos in Archie's ear, "it's going to be worse." The body she leaves him, ravished with knives, nails and more, is so thoroughly broken that Archie is addicted to painkillers, swallowing enough Vicodin each day that he is "high ... in a

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state of perpetual in-between," his consciousness altered to the point that it seems to enhance his skills as a detective.

"Heartsick" is a dizzying novel. Lurid and suspenseful with well-drawn characters, plenty of grisly surprises and tart dialogue, it delivers what readers of this particular kind of thriller expect. But the risk of emulating a virtuoso longtime best seller like "The Silence of the Lambs" is failing to equal it. "Heartsick" is not as elegantly conceived as its model. The idea of using one psycho killer to catch another is hard to improve; replacing a cop with a journalist involves creating a separate workplace, loosens structure and slackens tension. To save lives, the F.B.I.'s Clarice Starling of "The Silence of the Lambs" must return to Hannibal for his help. Until the revelation at the end of "Heartsick," Gretchen's bearing on Archie's new case is peripheral, her relationship with him apparently not necessary to his success as a detective. And Gretchen herself, despite her delicate looks, is not the exquisite Dr. Lecter, a culturally fluent cannibal who peppers his conversation with allusions to Renaissance art, publishes articles in The Journal of Clinical Psychology and reminisces about enjoying a victim's liver "with some fava beans and a big Amarone." Hannibal's preternatural intellect allows him to penetrate Clarice's mind, her soul. He opens her without a scalpel; prison bars and shackles can't protect a person from his kind of plundering. Gretchen, shattering ribs and force-feeding Archie drain cleaner until he vomits blood, is comparably clumsy in her approach. Her victim returns to her not because he seeks illumination but because beautiful Gretchen, like the *vagina dentata* she is, has consumed him. Archie cannot find himself without going to her. "You died," she explains. "But I brought you back. ... Because we're not done yet."

Murder is, of course, a means of asserting power, and in terms of the archetypes that animate thrillers, film noir, comic books and other popular culture, beauty is a trope for female power just as intellectual prowess represents male potency. The femme fatale has been around so long — remember the sirens of Greek mythology? — that the female killer's audience expects, perhaps demands, beauty in proportion to viciousness. Innocence has a plainer face. Because the journalist Susan Ward is "striking," her "rosebud mouth" must be balanced, defeminized, by her "large forehead" (i.e., intelligence). The genre's terms dictate that Susan prove her goodness by intentionally playing down her looks, wearing her hair short like a "deranged flapper" and dyeing it pink so it "distracted from the sweetness of her features." Herein lies an essential difference between the ill-favored Aileen Wuornos of the world and the lovely Gretchen Lowell, between true-crime serial killers and the femme fatale. Not only does Gretchen's physical perfection allow her to attract and manipulate her victims, but it also protects her from the suspicion of a largely male police force, all too easily discombobulated by her big blue eyes.

"She's a psychopath," protests one of Archie's female colleagues, unaffected by a woman's wiles, when she catches him sneaking off to visit Gretchen. "Yeah," he agrees, "but she's my psychopath." Who belongs to whom may never be resolved, but as Gretchen says, "we're not done yet." Sequels are in the works. □