

# Femme Fatale

A beautiful serial killer likes to see her victims suffer, and Chelsea Cain's detective can't get enough of it.

BY AMY FINNERTY

THE characters in Chelsea Cain's second thriller, "Sweetheart," are so cinematic that we reflexively cast the film version while reading. Bliss Mountain — that's a person, not an address — has bleached dreadlocks and a Brazilian wax in the shape of a peace sign (in protest of the "illegal war"). Her daughter, Susan, is a skittish, romantically needy newspaper

## SWEETHEART

By Chelsea Cain.

328 pp. St. Martin's Minotaur. \$24.95.

reporter with hair dyed Atomic Turquoise. The setting is Portland, Ore., where the bodily pierced and yoga-enthralled mingle breezily with homesteaders and gruff civil servants. Bliss and Susan embody the tolerant milieu.

But Gretchen Lowell, the soft-spoken, flawlessly pretty serial killer who first appeared in Cain's "Heartsick," has no time for urban coexistence. She's too busy killing children and seducing the book's protagonist, Detective Archie Sheridan. Gretchen kills serenely and dresses taste-

*Amy Finnerty is a freelance writer and editor in New York.*

fully, and had her tubes tied at age 17, knowing it was probably not in the public interest for her to reproduce.

She savors the suffering of others, and no profound exploration of her emotional deformity is forthcoming from the author. Sharon Stone playing the flirtatious sociopath in "Basic Instinct" comes to mind. The tale is time-honored. A refined ice woman enchants a complex but weak protagonist and cleans his clock. As a cop charged with catching the the so-called Beauty Killer in "Heartsick," Archie is duped and tortured by Gretchen. Now embroiled with surgical and emotional scars (she tied him to a gurney, forced drain cleaner down his throat, removed his spleen and carved up his torso with a scalpel), he is crawling back toward normalcy with his long-suffering wife, Debbie, and their young children. The trouble is, he feels guilty about some long-buried secret, and as a result, it becomes evident, he likes being tortured by a beautiful blonde. He shrinks from his wife's touch and has erotic fantasies about Gretchen.

Archie's vulnerability is manifest in his "long nose and lopsided mouth, thick hair and sad eyes, each a physical remnant of an ancestor, black Irish, Croatian, Jewish. . . . Even his genotype was tragic." But despite his self-loathing, he is profoundly likable. Addicted to pain killers, he emerges from disability leave as Gretchen

(inevitably) escapes from prison. For 325 pages, we are caught up in the fear that her blood lust will lead her to his innocent family. Cain skillfully recruits us as moral caretakers as Archie struggles to overcome his sexual Stockholm syndrome and cut back on Vicodin.

"Sweetheart" is a sadistic crime flick laid out on the page. But it is, simultaneously, a meditation on a commonplace woe — the scripted, suicidal midlife crisis. Archie can't stop thinking about the taut-skinned psychopath. He is enslaved by his cellphone, waiting for her to call. He has met with her regularly in prison — their version of the proverbial hotel room — to extract her confessions. He hates her and himself. He is dying to sleep with her. He is obsessed.

Much is made of Gretchen's physical perfection and Archie's infatuation with her appearance, but her allure is equally tied to risk, pain and engagement with the world. The author places Archie's wife and children in the domestic shadows; they are two-dimensional and dull compared with the women Archie encounters during his workday.

We wonder if he might find solace in Susan, the reporter whose naïveté is disguised by

outward toughness. She wants to win prizes and attaches herself to older editors. One, recruited from a storied New York City daily, sports a ponytail. He has slept with her and let her hold his Pulitzer. This may be the only revelation in the book that makes us more physically ill than Gretchen's amateur surgery. Another of Susan's mentors, a ripe newsroom cliché, is a hard-drinking, shoe-leather journalist with a heart of gold.

Fortunately, most of us have never encountered a real serial killer, so we are all too pleased to give the author license as she invents Gretchen in wanton, wide-screen glory. "Sweetheart" is not a nuanced psychological thriller in the tradition of P.D. James or Margaret Atwood. The violence is too predictable and graphic to be terrifying. But the novel is sensual and engulfing. We feel Archie's every

aching rib and taste the bitter narcotics he downs five pills at a time to banish his agony. We smell Gretchen's lilac perfume and the entrails she likes to leave as calling cards. But it is the marital drama entwined with the carnage — Archie's conflict, his wife's protective rage and the menace posed by the ultimate home wrecker — that keeps us turning the pages. □

