



Cain shows she's able

## Killer Aptitude

Move over, Hannibal Lecter! Chelsea Cain's thriller boasts a wicked new serial murderer.

BY JENNIFER REESE



**Heartsick**  
Chelsea Cain  
Thriller

If there were as many serial killers in real life as there are slashing their way through pop culture, overpopulation would be a nonissue and we would all sleep with butcher knives under our pillows. Serial killers hold a special place in our nightmares not

because they are a problem most of us will ever confront, but because they are monsters with human faces, even movie-star faces.

In her dynamite first thriller, *Heartsick*, Chelsea Cain introduces one of the most seductive and original psychopaths since Hannibal Lecter: Gretchen Lowell, a sleek X-Acto-wielding blonde who left some 200 mutilated corpses strewn across the country before she mysteriously turned herself in. Wearing her “manacles like they were bracelets, lovely and expensive baubles to be admired and envied,” Gretchen has been in prison for two years when the novel begins. She meets weekly with Archie Sheridan, the Portland, Ore., cop who helped bring her down, reeling him in with promises to reveal the whereabouts of additional bodies. In her final act as a free woman, Gretchen captured Archie, tortured him, and removed his spleen—a piece of ghoulish theater that Cain reveals in brief flashbacks.

Something psychologically curious happened

between them all those years ago that left Archie in Gretchen's thrall. Archie needs to break her spell. He also needs to track down the latest evildoer to hit Portland, a rapist who strangles his teenage victims, then soaks their corpses in bleach. Archie's not the only one on the case: He chases clues while being tailed by reporter Susan Ward, another troubled antihero with pink hair, a penchant for married men, and some psychic baggage of her own to unload.

These interesting, not-entirely-lovable protagonists continually express interesting, not-entirely-lovable feelings that you won't often hear good guys in other suspense novels fess up to. Archie sexually desires the vicious woman who literally dissected him; Susan wants to hate Gretchen, but, being vain and competitive, can't help studying her chic sense of style, her glowing skin, and her throaty laugh “like Bette Davis, like sex and lung cancer. She'd probably spent years practicing. It was worth that kind of effort.”

In addition to spiky characters, Cain has a crisp voice, a wicked sense of humor, and an imagination for all the horrors that can unfold in a locked basement. “Whatever you think this is going to be like,” Gretchen tells Archie as she begins a torture session, “it's going to be worse.” Bad news for Archie, but good news for readers who relish a profoundly creepy thriller. **A-**



### Backstory

+ In her 1996 memoir, *Dharma Girl*, Cain recounts a cross-country trip with her hippie mom, who'd recently been diagnosed with cancer. They drove from Oregon to Iowa, where Cain had been raised on a commune.