

THE ARENA

THRILLERS

A Female Serial Killer Takes a Breather

BY ALEXANDRA ALTER

CHELSEA CAIN OCCUPIES a peculiar niche in the thriller-writing ecosystem.

"Of the paperbacks that you see at the airport, I am the most violent woman writer," Ms. Cain says proudly.

Ms. Cain made her name with an unforgettable protagonist: the blond, icy blue-eyed serial killer Gretchen Lowell. Her "Gretchen" series generated one million copies in print and foreign rights have sold in 24 countries. Film rights have been optioned by the actress January Jones ("Mad Men"), who would play Gretchen in the movie, say Ms. Cain and her agent. Ms. Jones's publicist didn't respond.

Despite her success, Ms. Cain decided to make a change. She worried that potential readers might be scared off after reviewers billed the novels as nightmare-inducing bloodbaths. Her antiheroine tortures detective Archie Sheridan, carving out his spleen, cutting a heart shape into his chest and feeding him drain cleaner. In a later book, Gretchen kills and skins a 12-year-old.

So she decided to write something that would be accessible to the "lily-livered." "I wanted to find a way to create a page turner without all the stabbing," she said.

The result is "The Night Season," the fourth book in the series and the tamest to date. The action centers on Det. Sheridan and his sidekick, re-



porter Susan Ward, as they hunt a serial killer who's poisoning his victims with a blue-ringed octopus. (Ms. Cain says she came up with the murder weapon by Googling "deadliest venom.") Floodwaters engulf Portland, Ore., and bodies keep washing up. Gretchen, still in prison, mostly makes sporadic appearances through the detective's memories.

Ms. Cain's bid to reach a broad, mainstream audience without disappointing Gretchen fans may prove tricky. The series has been especially popular with women, who make up the majority of mystery and thriller readers. (Women account for nearly 71% of mystery-book buyers, accord-

ing to a 2010 survey by Bowker, which tracks book publishing. Ms. Cain says her books resonate with women because most thrillers lack complex female characters. "I've had young women come up to me at the end of an event and say 'I find Gretchen inspiring,' which I find deeply unsettling," Ms. Cain says.

Ms. Cain, who previously wrote humor books and a memoir about growing up in a commune in Iowa, burst onto the thriller-writing scene in 2007 with "Heartsick."

She wasn't exactly an overnight success, however. She wrote 10 other unpublished novels—which she now calls "terrible"—before "Heartsick." She got the idea for a novel about a detective's relationship with a female serial killer six years ago, while she was pregnant with her daughter. She was up late one night and saw an episode of "Larry King Live" about the Green River Killer, a notorious murderer in the Pacific Northwest.

When the first manuscript circulated, a bidding war broke out among publishers, and Minotaur, a crime and thriller imprint, acquired the first three books for seven figures. She recently signed for three more.

"They wanted a woman who could write a good murder scene," Ms. Cain says.

Her experiment with less grisly plot twists may be short-lived: "I want the next book to have more sex and violence in it," she says. "That may be my one true narrative gift."