

## EVIL AT HEART

By Chelsea Cain.

Minotaur, \$24.99.

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You have to hand it to Cain, who's made the serial-killer genre a thoroughly female-friendly experience. It's not just that Gretchen Lowell, the psycho killer at the center of Cain's thrillers, is a woman. She is also gorgeous, intelligent, irresistible to men — so hard to hate that she's become a pop-culture phenomenon, gracing magazine covers and enthralled fans who take guided tours of her murder sites. Cain seems to want us to be equally appalled and amused by the stylish Gretchen and her lover-victim-nemesis, Detective Archie Sheridan. This third book of the series begins with Archie on a mental ward, recovering from a creative torture session that involved swallowing drain cleaner, enduring a splenectomy and having one of Gretchen's signature hearts carved into his chest. His dilemma: How can he capture her when, after all that, he still wants to sleep with her? The book wrestles with the idea that the media's obsession with serial killers has aided Gretchen and inspired copycats. (Serial-killer novels are presumably off the hook.) Cain, who started her career rather more placidly with "Dharma Girl," a memoir of her childhood on a hippie commune, churns stomachs with a delicate touch. Let's just say that small, vulnerable body parts — eyeballs, tongues, urethras — get a lot of play. □