

# The Sunday Oregonian

\$2.00

SUNRISE EDITION ★★★

**RIGHT** | Chelsea Cain and her Boston terriers, Lucy and Rosie, check the clock in her bedroom. If it's 2:45 p.m., it's time to pick up her daughter Eliza at kindergarten.

BETH NAKAMURA  
THE OREGONIAN

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*This is the first in an occasional series of articles called **Where I Write** that will use work space as a way to explore the hows and whys of writing.*



## CHELSEA CAIN A WRITER ON THE MOVE

The author of the best-selling Gretchen Lowell thrillers says changing rooms while writing clears "creative congestion"

By **JEFF BAKER** | THE OREGONIAN

**IN THE HOUSE THAT GRETCHEN BUILT**, there are many rooms. Chelsea Cain writes in almost all of them.

Cain lives with her husband and daughter and two frisky Boston terriers in a big white house in Colonial Heights, just above Ladd's Addition in Southeast Portland. The family moved in four years ago, after Cain signed a multimillion-dollar contract for a series of thrillers set in Portland and featuring a serial killer named Gretchen Lowell. There are two other main characters, police detective Archie Sheridan and newspaper columnist Susan Ward, but it's Lowell who gets all the attention with her feminine wiles and imaginative methods of torture. The gorier Gretchen gets, the more Cain's readers love her.

"My readers are (quite seriously damaged),"

Cain says and bursts out laughing. The 39-year-old author then gives a more thoughtful explanation for Lowell's popularity that includes the word "archetypes" and makes perfect sense without contradicting the initial, blunt assessment. It's the kind of contradiction Cain embraces; she writes down-and-dirty novels in a comfortable, lived-in home after giving up on writing in coffee shops and on airplanes because she was afraid her content would offend strangers who sneak a peek.

"People read stuff over your shoulder when you're in public," she says, "and when you write the kind of stuff I do and people read it over your shoulder, it makes you a little self-conscious."

Self-conscious is not the way most people who read Cain's books or remember her weekly

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### Where I Write First in a series



Moving from room to room is a nice luxury but no solution to the hard, lonely work of getting a novel finished, Cain admits.

**LEFT** | Chelsea Cain works her way through her house during the day, working in one room until concentration or inspiration wears off.

Photos by  
BETH NAKAMURA  
THE OREGONIAN



# CHELSEA CAIN | A WRITER ON THE MOVE

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column in *The Oregonian* would think of her. Self-aware and open are more accurate descriptors as she leads an upstairs-to-down tour that doubles as a discussion of how and why she writes. All three previous books in the Gretchen Lowell series made *The New York Times* best-seller list, and Cain's wondering what people will think now that the Beauty Killer is in prison and mostly offstage in her new novel "The Night Season," due out Tuesday. Cain misses writing about Lowell but knows that too much information about serial killers makes them boring.

"The monster is only scary for a minute," reads a note on the bulletin board of her third-floor work space, a reminder from Chuck Palahniuk, a friend and member of the same writing group.

Just before a video interview begins and Cain starts explaining why she no longer writes in such a big, bright room, she jumps up and puts a skeleton behind herself. Its name is Budget Bart (because it was the cheapest model on the website) and was a gift from her husband. It serves as a silent witness while the Boston terriers, Lucy ("the good one") and Rosie ("bad"), are more active listeners.

"I used to work here all the time," Cain says. "It started to feel too much like an office so I stopped coming up here. I thought I would get an office outside the home and I did, in North Portland, at Falcon Art Community, which is filled with artists. I thought, this is great, I'll go to work with other artists. I rented this space and had them paint it this incredibly brilliant blue. I thought if I had an office that was that blue I'd go there every day and write, but that didn't work. I've gone there like three times in the last four months. Somehow having an office that I had to go to made me want to work from home, which is easier to do if you don't have a boss waiting for you at the office, even a very blue office."

### Emphasis on comfort

Back home, Cain began moving from room to room, laptop in hand. Her writing day begins after her husband takes their 6-year-old daughter, Eliza, to kindergarten and ends when she picks Eliza up at 2:45 p.m. In those five or six hours, she might write in four or five different rooms, including the library ("which is not really a library, we just call it that to sound fancy"), the living room and the TV room. What those three rooms have in common is comfortable couches. The upstairs study has a bed, a temptation for an afternoon nap that proved too great on more than one occasion.

Moving from room to room is a nice luxury but no solution

to the hard, lonely work of getting a novel finished, Cain admits.

"It seems to just clear up the creative congestion, which is a total superstition but seems to work for me," she says. "Luckily I have a house with many rooms or I would never get anything done."

When it's time to really concentrate, she leaves everything behind and goes back to the third floor for three or four weeks of 12-hour writing sessions. It's not easy for Cain to be productive in an hour; there are too many moving parts in a novel compared to a newspaper column. She does work on promotion and the marketing details involved with being a commercially successful fiction writer in the e-book era. Research is another task that can be done in any room, and Cain likes to find macabre ways to die and weave them into her plots. In "The Night Season" there's some poison cephalopod research and a harrowing description of drowning that would make Budget Bart shiver.

Every room where Cain works — living room, library, TV room, bedroom — is an inviting space, unlike the basement in her previous house near Emanuel Hospital that was "all flickering lights and black mold and rats." She used it as an office and started writing "Heartsick," the first in the Gretchen Lowell series, while pregnant with Eliza.

"That's why I write thrillers, I'm pretty sure, from that scary, dark room," she says.

### "The lasagna approach"

"The Night Season" started, as all Cain's books do, as the previous title ("Evil at Heart," in this case) was finishing. For her, there is a period of what she calls serial monogamy, when all her energy is concentrated on the book she's writing, interrupted at the end by a "seven-year itch" when she thinks about the upcoming book. She starts writing a chapter at a time with just dialogue, unattributed, until she completes a first draft. It's an unusual way to write fiction, one she developed as a way to help make the transition from nonfiction.

"All those chapters will be the same, but I'll add chapters and I'll expand on them because my narrative tends to be a little slight right off the bat," she says with a laugh.

The first draft, then, is both an outline and a frame. For some writers, the first draft is where they pour everything out.

"Which seems to be a much more usual process," Cain says.

And then they cut and find the story in it. Cain's method is more like a skeleton.

"You hear that, Bart?" Cain says, glancing behind her. "You inspire me so."

"I think of it as the lasagna

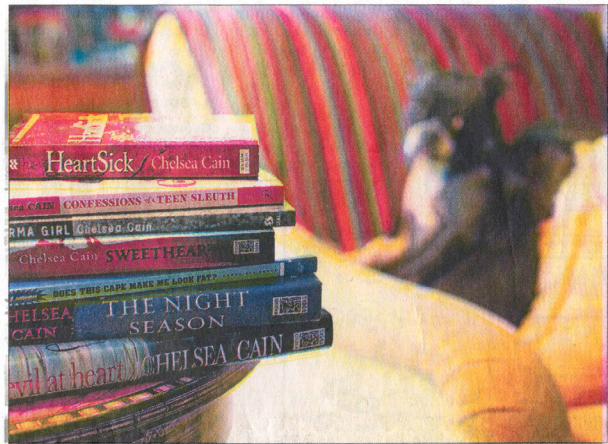
approach to writing because I'm always adding layers. I'll sometimes do it layer by layer, with dialogue, attribution, action, objects in the scene, setting. ... It can be sometimes that delineated."

The lasagna approach? "You like that? I came up with it myself."

It's afternoon, and Cain has a couple of hours before she has to pick up Eliza. She could work on questionnaires or other chores involved with the promotion of "The Night Season." The turmoil in the bookstore world is making a direct impact on her — several key executives at Barnes & Noble were laid off shortly after she met with them — and social media is more important than ever.

On the bright side, "Mad Men" star January Jones took an option on Cain's series and is interested in playing Gretchen Lowell, and Cain is thinking about starting a new series, set in Portland and written in first person. It's part of the seven-year itch phase, and she's ready to start moving from room to room.

Cain reads from "The Night Season" at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.; at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Borders Gresham, 667 N.W. 12th Ave., Gresham; and at 7 p.m. March 8 at Murder by the Book, 3210 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.



ABOVE | Besides her series of thrillers set in Portland, Cain has written a memoir ("Dharma Girl"), an homage to Nancy Drew ("Confessions of a Teen Sleuth") and humor books.



LEFT | A third-floor bed is a tempting spot for a midday nap. Best to avoid that room on drowsy days.



RIGHT | Budget Bart the skeleton stands silent and ready, providing inspiration and visual proof that this is the house of a writer who thinks of inventive ways to die.



You can see — and hear — Chelsea Cain talk about her writing in a video at [oregonlive.com/o](http://oregonlive.com/o)