

Book Review

Inky Depths

The serial killer Gretchen Lowell is locked up, but a new threat confounds Detective Archie Sheridan.

BY ZOË SLUTZKY

PORTLAND, Ore., is wet from the start of “The Night Season.” A storm has soaked the city for weeks. Gulls line the roads, blown inland from the sea. The Willamette River surges with debris. Rain cascades from rooftops and clogs the basement drains of the Multnomah Coun-

THE NIGHT SEASON

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ty morgue. This Portland is much like the one in Chelsea Cain’s previous novels, but darker, blurred around the edges and sunk under a cloud cover that threatens to engulf it completely.

Into this waterlogged world trudges Cain’s troubled hero, Detective Archie Sheridan, “a stubborn martyr with a white knight complex.” A woman has been found dead, draped atop the riverside merry-go-round. She seems to have drowned, but a tiny puncture on her palm suggests foul play. The two other people who drowned that week bear identical marks. When Archie’s longtime partner, Henry Sobol, lands in the I.C.U. with an

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unknown toxin in his veins, the case takes on new urgency. Suspended in semiconsciousness, Henry is both silent witness and sole survivor of the murderer’s rite.

By now, Archie (and Cain’s loyal readers, of which there are many) knows the signs of a serial killer all too well. In “Heartsick” and its two sequels, Cain conjured Gretchen Lowell, a blue-eyed psychopath with an endless résumé of gory murders. Archie was Gretchen’s special victim, trapped and tortured after 10 years on her trail, and spared at the 11th hour in a twisted act of mercy. Back in jail, Gretchen has receded to the fringes of the narrative, but her lethal beauty haunts the detective. He fingers the heart-shaped scar she carved into his chest as if it has replaced his own.

The crimes in “The Night Season” are at once less plausible and less deliciously perverse than Gretchen’s drawn-out butcheries. As the hours creep by, the task force discovers the killer’s bizarre, aquarium-bound weapon. The motive is murkier. Susan Ward, *The Oregon Herald*’s neon-haired crime columnist, returns in a central role, shadowing Archie as he makes his sleepless way through the investigation. Despite his half-hearted attempts to shake her off, her dogged detective work proves crucial to the case. “You know how everyone has a tiny talent?” she asks him. “Like parallel parking? Or catching serial killers? Mine is



‘You know how everyone has a tiny talent? Like catching killers? Mine is Googling.’

Googling.” Irreverent, vulnerable and sharp, she is as shrewdly drawn as Archie and as interesting to watch. As in the past, she ends up in the thick of things, and the book’s high-octane ending hinges on her resolve.

Cain intercuts her quick-paced chapters, which spin each narrative strand with expert restraint, with brief moments in the murderer’s footsteps. In one early

scene, Susan scours the park at night while the killer follows two paces behind, obscured by the darkness beyond her flashlight’s beam. “He could kill her. In a heartbeat,” he thinks. “He would not even break a sweat doing it.” These glimpses of psychosis are unsettling, but they never chill with the force of Gretchen’s ice-blue stare. Like Gretchen, this novel’s cephalopod-obsessed killer wants his victims to experience death — to know it intimately. But there is a motive to his derangement. Perhaps inevitably, Gretchen’s deadly machinations are more frightening for their wanton brand of evil.

Still, the world that Cain creates is as dark and ominous as ever. The novel’s greatest menace is the weather, which transforms Portland’s familiar topography into something less than welcoming. Flooded and obscured by rain, the city becomes wild, unknowable: “The thin wisps of trees lining the sidewalk shuddered, bare-leaved, in the wind. The whole world glistened wet and black, like the Pacific Ocean at night.” When the storm nearly levels its downtown, the sudden shifts in perspective are vertiginous, and thrilling. This is the mood that Cain has mastered: the dread of knowing something is off, but not being able to see it clearly. It is what presses her readers onward, pulses rising along with the waterline. □