Marshall Jevons on Murder and Microeconomics

Marshall Jevons is the mystery fiction team of William Breit and Kenneth G. Elzinga, professors of economics at Trinity University and the University of Virginia, respectively. Together they have authored three mystery books: Murder at the Margin, The Fatal Equilibrium, and A Deadly Indifference. The central character of these novels is Henry Spearman. Spearman relies on economic thinking to solve crimes—a distinction that places him in the pantheon of such fictional investigators as Father Brown, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, and Rabbi Small.

MURDER AT THE MARGIN

Cinnamon Bay Plantation on lush, tropical St. John was the ideal Caribbean island getaway: or so it seemed. But for distinguished Harvard economist Henry Spearman, long overdue for R & R, it offered diversion of a decidedly different sort and one he'd hardly anticipated: murder.

It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. Prickly and priggish, Gen. Hudson T. Decker (Ret.) may have been a Cinnamon Bay regular, but he'd managed to alienate fellow guests and a lot of townspeople over the years. Suddenly, before the local inspector has assembled a suspect list, there is a mysterious drowning and a second murder, this time a former U.S. Supreme Court justice. Prime suspects abound: a liberal professor of divinity, a vengeful wife, an alleged girlfriend, and a handful of angry local activists.

While the island police force is mired in an investigation that leads everywhere and nowhere, the diminutive, balding Spearman, who likes nothing better than to train his curiosity on human behavior, conducts and investigation of his own, one governed by rather different laws—those of economics. Theorizing, hypothesizing, Spearman sets himself on the trail of the killer as it twists from the postcard-perfect beaches and manicured lawns of a premier resort to the bustling old port of Charlotte Amalie to the densely forested hiking paths with their perilous drops to a barren, deserted cay offshore.

Now available in a new critical edition, Marshall Jevon's Murder at the Margin was first published in 1978, when it marked the debut of Henry Spearman.

THE FATAL EQUILIBRIUM

Dennis Gossen is dead, an apparent suicide, after his career in economics has been cut short by the Harvard Promotion and Tenure Committee. When two members of that committee are killed, Gossen's fiancée, Melissa Shannon, finds herself indicted for murder. Once again, Henry Spearman, Professor of Economics at Harvard, finds himself on the track of a murder and once again Marshall Jevons presents
his readers with a captivating murder mystery riddle.

Was it Morrison Bell, mathematics star, inventor of devices to defeat the squirrels in his birdfeeders? Or was it owl-like Oliver Wu, the distinguished sociologist who harbors deep resentments? Was it Valerie Danzig, supposedly former "item" with Dennis Gossen? Or maybe Foster Barrett, gourmet Harvard classicist? What about Christolph Burckhardt, infatuated employer of Gossen's fiancée? Or Sophia Ustinov, Russian emigré, lover of American poetry and Borzoi hounds? Three lives come to an end. And when Spearman begins to piece it together, the murder and Henry find themselves face to face on a luxury liner in a storm at sea in the fourth and final Fatal Equilibrium.

For the reader who follows the clues, the solution to this conundrum is, as usual in the best of this genre, elementary. The difference in this case is that it is elementary economics. The Fatal Equilibrium is a mystery novel that provides a grasp of basic economics on the way to finding out whodunit. Its predecessor, Murder at the Margin, has already achieved a cult following. In a review of Jevons's earlier book, The Wall Street Journal remarked that "if there is a more painless way to learn economic principles, scientists must have recently discovered how to implant them in ice cream."

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**A DEADLY INDIFFERENCE**

The most ingenious of amateur sleuths—Harvard professor Henry Spearman, who uses economics to size up every situation—is back as he plunges into his most puzzling and dangerous adventure yet.

Spearman and his wife Pidge are on an unusual mission. They are in Cambridge, England to scout out the most famous house in economic science: Balliol Croft, the former dwelling place of Professor Alfred Marshall, John Maynard Keynes' teacher and the fount of modern economic theory. A foundation headed by Chicago entrepreneur Morris Fain hopes to turn Marshall's home into an institute for the study of free enterprise.

It soon becomes clear that someone is intent on keeping Fain—and others—from acquiring Balliol Croft. The shocking and bizarre murder of Nigel Hart, the Master of Bishop's College, and the mysterious events leading up to this crime makes it clear that any attempt to acquire Alfred Marshall's residence is risky business. When a second corpse turns up, the body of a young woman who had connections with Balliol Croft in the past, Henry Spearman is jolted into realizing that not only Fain's life but also his own is in peril.

Using economic theory in the thoroughly engaging ways, the sleuthing professor investigates murder against the incongruent background of the gothic spires and heraldic emblems of King's College Chapel, punts gliding on the River Cam, and students emerging from the portals of ancient college quadrangles. As he unravels the deadly events at Cambridge, Spearman finds himself face to face with the most diabolical killer of his experience.

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