

# Econ 101: Mystery novelist polishes his Spearman

By Susan Anspach

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It's been a decade since UVA economist Kenneth Elzinga and his cross-continental colleague Bill Breit released a mystery novel, but fans of the unusual mixture of Murder 101 and Econ 101 may eventually be rewarded for their patience.

Next year, Elzinga will temporarily leave his UVA duties to serve as a visiting researcher at Trinity University, where he'll collaborate again with Breit, who recently retired from that San Antonio school's faculty.

Elzinga, for one, has certainly had his hands full. Besides teaching— including his always wait-listed "Principles of Economics"— he has served as a consultant for Microsoft in its recent antitrust case and remained active at another Trinity: Trinity Presbyterian Church.

Yet Elzinga confirms that he's temporarily waiving Charlottesville responsibilities to work on the mystery, details of which neither author wishes to disclose. Readers can rest assured, Elzinga says, that fictional detective Henry Spearman and his innovative case-solving methods will make a fourth appearance. Spearman appears in all the previous works with Breit (who uses the pseudonym Marshall Jevons): *Murder at the Margin*, *The Fatal Equilibrium*, *A Deadly Indifference*.

"The economics element of our books sets them apart from other mysteries," Elzinga says. "Agatha Christie uses psychology to crack her cases. One of her protagonists, Miss Marple, uses women's intuition. Our hero uses economics."

The combination of suspense and academia has proved to be a successful formula, as the books are often assigned in beginning econ courses in high schools and universities— even though Elzinga contends he never expected them to hit any syllabus beyond his and Breit's.

"[*The Fatal Equilibrium*] challenged me to think about economics from an everyday point of view," says recent UVA grad Lindsey Benson. "Reading the book helped me understand some of the concepts we learned in class, allowing me to better appreciate the subject."

Elzinga says the mysteries do more than expound upon basic economic principles.

"You don't need any knowledge in economics in order to understand and appreciate our books," he says. "They're entirely self-contained, and we wrote them that way on purpose."

"My favorite fan letter came not from a student," Elzinga told the *New York Times* in 2002, "but from a woman who was a professor of economics whose marriage was on the rocks. She gave one of our mysteries to her husband who, upon reading it, said he now understood his wife's way of thinking. Their marriage was saved. True to her professional colors, she told us buying our book was more economical than marital counseling."

Elzinga claims that the books' success is due in part to the balance he and Breit have as a writing team.

"Bill is pretty creative, and I'm the disciplined one," he says. "I don't think that either of us could do this alone."

**Age?** I joined the UVA faculty in the fall of 1967. Readers of the *Hook* can do the math.

**Why here?** Among the job offers I had when I completed my PhD, my major professor advised me to take the one from UVA. I still remember his words: "Mr. Elzinga, you'll stay there the rest of your life." Not a bad forecast for an academic economist.

**Favorite hangout?** The Dragon Lady

**Most overrated virtue?** Multi-tasking

**People would be surprised to know?** My students would be surprised to learn that I have never seen a complete episode of *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Cheers*, *The Sopranos* (or even *The Waltons* or *Little House on the Prairie*).

**What would you change about yourself?** All these years, and still no Nobel Prize in economics

**Proudest accomplishment?** Teaching awards from my students at the University

**Whom do you admire?** C. S. Lewis as a writer; Ronald Reagan as a president; Daryl Richman as a follower of Christ; Milton Friedman as an economist; Bill Breit as a model teacher-scholar-friend

**Favorite Book?** The Bible

**Subject that causes you to rant?** I'm not much of a ranter. Like most economists, I can restrain my enthusiasm for people who want the government to help the poor but won't give their own time or money to do so.

**Biggest 21st Century thrill?** Celebrating the millennium's arrival with my wife in Antarctica

**Biggest 21st Century creep out?** 9/11/2001

**What do you drive?** An Audi A6

**In your car CD player right now?** Well, the car holds 5 CDs. Currently, two have Mars Hill Audio Journals; two have lectures from The Teaching Company, and one has Riders in the Sky, "Public Cowboy #1."

**Next journey:** To Cairo, to observe Christian missionary work to the community that lives and works at Mokattam, the city dump

**Most trouble you've ever gotten in?** I was not able to account for my American money as I was returning from East to West Berlin. The East German police (at Checkpoint Charlie) were not *gemutlich* to me (this was before the fall of the wall).

**Regret:** Not being a great husband

**Favorite comfort food:** Hot fudge sundae or strawberry-rhubarb pie

**Always in your refrigerator:** Shelves and drawers. But my wife, Terry, always maintains a tasty inventory of consumables. I wish there was always a piece of strawberry-rhubarb pie, though.

**Must-see TV:** I hardly ever watch TV— but I make an exception when UVA is in a post-season game.

**Favorite cartoon:** Toss-up between Peanuts and Dilbert

**Describe a perfect summer day:** Water ski in the morning with friends and/or students; do research in the afternoon; have dinner with my wife and take Little Rotunda (our dog) for a walk, and then do research into the evening

**Walter Mitty fantasy:** I'm not sure economists are wired to fantasize. Ask us about utility maximization instead.

**Who'd play you in the movie?** I would ask my former student Tom Shadyac. He's directed at least four movies with Jim Carrey; but I doubt if Carrey would be Tom's choice. Maybe Ian Carmichael?

**Most embarrassing moment:** I teach my Antitrust Policy class Socratically and expect daily preparation by my students. One morning I went to class and called on three different students to discuss a particular antitrust case. None could, so I stormed out, telling them that if they did not care to work, neither did I. About five minutes later a student knocked on my office door. He had been sent by the other students to tell me that I had not assigned that case. I was mortified.

**Best advice you ever got:** From Daryl Richman, a dear Christian friend, who told me that I was not called to be successful, I was called to be faithful.

**Favorite bumper sticker:** Dog is my co-pilot. Now that's funny, I don't care where you're from.

**Kenneth Elzinga**

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