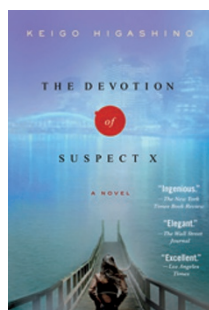


Perfect crime, Non-Perfect crime



The Devotion of Suspect X

By Keigo Higashino
(translated by
Alexander O. Smith)

MINOTAUR BOOKS:
2011. 448PP. £7.99

It all starts with a murder — and from the very beginning you know who the murderer is. The mystery is not who did it, but how it was covered up. It may look like an unsolvable case, but is there such a thing as a perfect crime? Keigo Higashino's *The Devotion of Suspect X* is an unusual detective story built around the question, “Which is harder: devising an unsolvable problem, or solving that problem?” — in other words, the famous $P = NP$ problem.

$P = NP$ is one of the seven Clay Mathematics Institute Millennium Prize Problems, the renowned unsolved question of whether problems whose solutions can be quickly verified (that is, in polynomial time) can also be solved quickly. The conundrum has deep implications: $P = NP$ means that all problems have easily computable solutions, which would be wonderful for mathematicians and programmers but devastating for cryptographers, and

could have terrible consequences for the world, as contemplated in the 2012 film, *Travelling Salesman* (<http://www.travellingsalesmanmovie.com>). But fortunately, or unfortunately, it is most likely that $P \neq NP$.

There is no shortage of mathematics- and physics-inspired fiction, nor of ‘science-y’ detective stories. But here is a ‘science mystery’ — a genre championed by Japanese authors, which is unfortunately too little known in the West. Science mystery is written by people with a scientific background and Keigo Higashino and Hiroshi Mori (whose work is not yet translated into English) are probably the best known representatives of this genre. The plots are clever and intellectually stimulating, and the science is well documented and accurate (unlike some CERN-related fiction). The stories usually involve eccentric, but charismatic, academics solving intricate murder cases committed by other scientists or by clever people with a good knowledge of science. The genre uses the analytic and experimental tools of research to formulate and test hypotheses and ultimately find out the truth about the crime. It also touches on deeper questions about science and ethics, which admittedly might be a little hard to digest for the general public. It is not hard science-fiction, but rather ‘hard science’ fiction.

In *The Devotion of Suspect X* two scientists take on the $P = NP$ problem in a very

unconventional context. Tetsuya Ishigami, maths prodigy, turned by unfortunate circumstances into an unhappy high-school teacher, skilfully covers up the murder committed by his neighbour. The detective assigned to investigate it brings the case to his friend Manabu Yukawa, associate professor in the physics department of a fictitious top university. Yukawa and Ishigami are both graduates from the very same university, and although in different departments they used to be engaged in a friendly rivalry. This unexpected encounter with his university friend makes Yukawa take a personal interest in the case. But solving the puzzle devised by the math genius is — as expected — quite hard, perhaps NP.

The Devotion of Suspect X is a cleverly-written mystery novel, full of suspense and ingeniously concluded. The story does have a few clichés, such as omnipresent lab coats (even though no experiments are going on), but it also touches on some sad and very real aspects of academia — the struggle to get a permanent position, for instance. Yukawa (nicknamed Detective Galileo by his detective friend) is without doubt the scientist: logical, distant and unemotional, completely absorbed by research and socially inept to some extent. But at the same time he is brilliant, sporty, good-looking and well-dressed (even fashionable). On top of that, however, Yukawa is obnoxious, stubborn and extremely annoying. A very unlikely portrait of a physicist — built out of stereotypes and qualities of comic book heroes — yet Yukawa still manages to be a very entertaining character, with his dry humour and quirky remarks: “people always suspect scientists of being up to no good”.

Higashino has struck the perfect balance of ‘hard science’ and clichés, and has turned Yukawa into a very popular character. *The Devotion of Suspect X* is the first novel in the Detective Galileo series, which also includes five short-story volumes and two other novels (*Salvation of a Saint* and *Midsummer Equation*). The series has been very successful and in 2008 *The Devotion of Suspect X* was adapted into a movie, and the second season of a TV series is now being aired in Japan (<http://www.fujitv.co.jp/galileo/index.html>). Perhaps the popularity of the series will spark some general interest in physics and change the common stereotypes: physicists are not just geeks, they are cool geeks. □

REVIEWED BY IULIA GEORGESCU

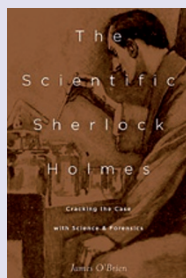


The Golden Ticket: P, NP, and the Search for the Impossible

By Lance Fortnow

PRINCETON UNIV. PRESS: 2013. 188PP. US\$26.95

A general introduction to the $P = NP$ problem — one of the most important open problems in mathematics and computer science — which asks whether a problem that can be checked quickly by a computer can also be solved quickly by a computer.



The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics

By James O'Brien

OXFORD UNIV. PRESS: 2013. 256PP. £18.99

It's time to place Sherlock Holmes' scientific skills under a magnifying glass. Apparently he was a competent chemist, despite Isaac Asimov's assertion to the contrary, but he didn't use much physics.