

The Oxford Murders

Reviewed by Robin Wilson

The Oxford Murders

Guillermo Martínez

Abacus, 2005

Paperback, 208 pages

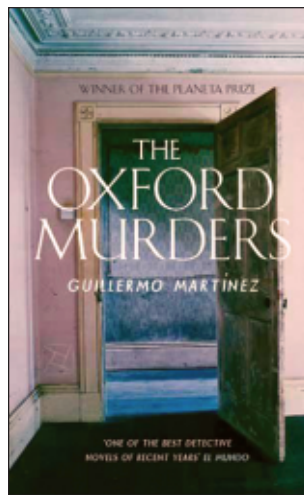
ISBN 0-349-11721-7

Using rules and axioms, there will always be some propositions that can't be proved either true or false. But can this apply to murder? So begins the cover description of this detective novel with a mathematical theme, set in Oxford in the summer of 1993.

The story is narrated by a young Argentinian student who comes to England for a year's postdoctoral study at Oxford University. Shortly after his arrival, his landlady is discovered brutally murdered, an event that brings him in contact with his long-term hero, the legendary Arthur Seldom, "one of the four leading minds in the field of logic", who had recently written a book on logical series that happened to include a chapter on serial killers. Arthur Seldom's appearance at the scene of the crime came as a consequence of his receiving a note containing a cryptic symbol—a small black circle—and announcing the murder as "the first of the series". Further murders follow in quick succession, each accompanied by a similar note and another cryptic symbol: if one could only predict the next symbol in the sequence, one might perhaps be able to prevent the next murder....

This book has many mathematical touches that will ring a chord with mathematicians—an excursion to Cambridge to attend Andrew Wiles' historic lecture on the Taniyama-Shimura conjecture and Fermat's last theorem, a mention of Angus MacIntyre's logic seminars at the Oxford Mathematical Institute, some examples of sequences, and regular attempts

Robin Wilson is professor of pure mathematics at the Open University, United Kingdom, and Gresham Professor of Geometry, London. His email address is R.J.Wilson@open.ac.uk.



to link the investigation of the crimes with Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem—so that I, as a mathematician living in Oxford, found myself very much at home.

The author has a Ph.D. in mathematics and has also begun to carve out a career for himself as a novelist—in particular, this book was awarded the prestigious Planeta Prize. The carefully constructed story was

enjoyable to read, with the usual clues and red herrings, a range of varied characters, a number of subplots, and a clever double twist at the dénouement. Yet the mystery novel is not without its faults. To my mind, it tended to drag in places, especially in a rather tedious chapter in which Gödel's theorem was discussed at too great a length, almost breaking the story line. (Explaining Gödel's theorem to a general audience is surely a worthy aim—but this didn't seem the right place to do it.) Indeed, how much sense these passages would have made to nonmathematicians reading the story is difficult to judge, but at least one such acquaintance found them unnecessarily tedious.

In recent years there have been a number of novels with a mathematical theme, most notably Apostolos Doxiadis's excellent *Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture*, which incorporates Gödel's ideas far more naturally. *The Oxford Murders*, while not the best of its genre, will certainly give pleasure to those with an interest in mathematics, even if it is less successful for other readers.