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**Detecting Disability:  
Moving beyond metaphor in the crime fiction of Jeffrey Deaver**

Andrew Jakubowicz  
University of Technology Sydney  
[Andrew.Jakubowicz@uts.edu.au](mailto:Andrew.Jakubowicz@uts.edu.au)

Helen Meekosha  
University of New South Wales, Australia  
[H.Meekosha@unsw.edu.au](mailto:H.Meekosha@unsw.edu.au)

If villainy is the major association in the public mind with disability, being a victim runs a close second (Zola, 1987)

**Introduction**

Attitudes towards disabled people are deeply embedded in the cultural order. The distinction between "normal" and "disabled" sits as one of the most widely spread dichotomies, part of the awareness produced in socialization of children, and then conveyed throughout the cultural milieu in which meanings are produced, exchanged, and consumed. The cultural realm remains a central locus for the operation of power, constantly reworking and re-ordering hierarchies, validating some behaviors, castigating others. As Bourdieu has noted in another context, "change in the space of literary or artistic possibilities is the result of change in the power relations which constitutes the space of production... It applies relational thinking not only to symbolic systems... but also to the social relations of which these symbolic systems are more or less a transformed expression". Disability as a social relation of power is thus heavily inflected by the forms of cultural representation in which it is embedded, and the cultural institutions and modalities in which the representation is circulated.

This article examines the role of detective fiction as a site of cultural negotiation of

disability. In particular we are interested in the popularity of Jeffrey Deaver's disabled detective, Lincoln Rhyme, and Deaver's use of disability as both a device to distinguish Rhyme from the mass of other detectives, and his use of wider social metaphors of disability to explore angst and meaning in contemporary society. We have analyzed four of Deaver's "disability" novels, teasing out the plot lines that use disability to establish, on the one hand, the personality changes apparently wrought by Rhyme's experiences of disabling conditions, and on the other hand, the politics of the relationships that disability transforms.

Cultural studies have devoted considerable energy to the examination of detective stories as part of the broader arena of popular fiction. The aggressive masculinity of detectives has been a matter of regular comment by feminist scholars, who see in these "hard-boiled" men a predatory style of pursuit of women criminals . Similarly, disability studies also has expressed an interest in popular fiction, though it has tended to focus on major writers of the great canon – where disability has regularly served as an emblematic frame for an exploration of the deviant, the dangerous and the hostile – most famously through the figure of the one-legged Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*.

### **Popular fiction and social attitudes towards disability**

The growth of disability studies as both a critique of traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and as an emergent disciplinary area of its own, has generated a considerable body of work around popular literature. Popular fiction offers to its audiences a combination of excitation – an emotional arousal and potential resolution – and of moral mapping. Audiences are drawn to the intellectual labor of pursuit of ideas, and the psychic labor of ethical choices. While the characters reflect often archly drawn and stereotypical figures, audiences draw on their own experiences of social relations to interpret and appraise the behavior of the participants of the fictional world.

In her discussion of Victorian popular literature, Stoddard Holmes follows the trajectories of a number of disabled women who are written to represent higher order moral values of self-denial and social service . The disabled woman is rarely the central figure in the plot – rather she is drawn on to provide a moral reflection on the behaviors of the "normal world," a sidelight constantly illuminating the main game. Yet Stoddard Holmes points to the discomfort for audiences occasioned by this type of plot, and the necessary care taken by authors with the narrative to keep audiences on side. Such a tension, between fascination and

repulsion, seems to mark the emergence of disabled figures in popular fiction.

### **Detection and Disability – medical and social models**

Enter the detective. The crime/mystery genre has been described as a major perpetuator of images of disability, given that so few people have a detailed knowledge of disability from their own experience and so many people consume crime fiction. Zola notes that even by 1940 some 25% of fiction published in the USA was of this genre, while the top 10 popular fiction sales today always include a significant number of crime/mystery authors. Major detective figures with a disability include the very popular wheelchair-using Ironside, and extend to a wide range of "disability types," from amputation to speech impairment .

There is a close relationship between detective stories and medical stories – they both concern an unknown predator attacking the "normal" person, and the predator being defeated by the hero –detective or doctor. It can also be argued that the detective story is the quintessential disability case study . The all-knowing, all-cerebral/mindful detective hunts down the villain – embodied evil, badness, a sickness in the body politic. If the villain is captured he is eliminated, incarcerated and/or removed from society. The scientist or the medical expert charts the progress of the disability/illness with the same fascination as the detective intent on capture and elimination (qua the human genome project-the ultimate detective story). Sometimes the subjects are incarcerated. The locked ward houses the mentally disturbed, the demented, the insane, the idiots, the slow and the feeble. The prison houses the criminally disturbed, the evil, the villainous.

So the doctor resembles the detective, indeed may even be the detective, intent on upholding social order and protecting the normates from those wreaking destruction.

But when the narrative diverts from the traditional script in a scenario where detective is disabled (Ironside, Lincoln Rhyme, Sherlock Holmes –invariably men) and in pursuit of the criminal – what does this convey to the audience? Is this the ultimate detective narrative? In the search for a new identity the disabled detective both reinforces the stereotype (brain at work) and confounds the stereotype (usually, disabled people are stereotypically the objects of action taken against them, rather than subjects in their own actions - deviants don't chase deviants, deviants can't chase deviants unless they are bent themselves).

Many authors have chosen disability as a means of indicating the separation of

their heroes from the "normal" world, releasing them from the repetitive obsequies of the everyday, and authorizing their free-wheeling engagement outside rules and regimes of power. Whether they be blind, lame, deaf or wheelchair users, their presence in another world – of pain, sensory deprivation, sensory intensification, or moral superiority – permits them to intrude, poke, sense, and irritate their way into the nether world of criminality and violent Others .

## **Superman**

When Superman (the actor Christopher Reeve) broke his neck (in a fall from a horse), little did he realize how much he was about to contribute to western culture's engagement with disability. Reeve, who had represented the hypermasculine to a generation of young Americans, went on to campaign for research into disability and its "cures." Superman was handsome, virtuous, vigorous and emotionally locked in, shadowed by his Clark Kent persona of wimpish sentimentality and unfulfilled desire.

The detective genre begins by the bringing together of an extraordinary brain with a powerful body in the one person, and then attacks the body to test the powers of the brain. From Sherlock Holmes on, the mind-ful detective confronts his own self-destructive urges and/or assaults by the enemy on his body. His mind rescues him each time. Nowhere is this generic romp more apparent than in the stream of work by American author Jeffrey Deaver, featuring the quadriplegic crime scene savant, Lincoln Rhyme. The Rhyme character has emerged in the wake of the Christopher Reeve phenomenon, and the specific, accidental but fortuitous irony of Reeve as Superman becoming disabled – which raised wider social interest in high-level quadriplegia, and provided Deaver with an archetype on which to base his character. Rhyme has now moved into super-star status, having been played on screen once by Denzel Washington (doubly stigmatised as Black and disabled in Phil Noyce's directed *The Bone Collector*), with two other novels sold to Hollywood studios and a writing history of evident energy.

Deaver has written a number of novels built around the idea of a morally flawed heroic figure (Superman struck down) – usually a man of middle years employed by some arm of government, like the police or FBI – who has to grapple with his criminal opponents, his employers and his own tortured psyche. William Shakespeare did this well and truly in *Hamlet* long ago – so Deaver has had to discover a particular twist to intensify the dramatic quality of the hero, his psychic angst, and the level of violence in the landscape in which he drifts. Disability has been his trope of choice, emerging out of the highly successful story *A Maiden's*

Grave (1995). We begin to see in *A Maiden's Grave*, where the kidnap victims are a group of Deaf young women, the devices that Deaver will employ increasingly to structure the life world of his action heroes.

Deaver uses disability as a metaphor for something wider and deeper in modern societies – his heroes represent the fragmented identity of contemporary urban worlds, in which the desire for life is constantly threatened by random violence and omnipresent danger. On the other hand, his villains are also damaged goods; some have been brain-injured or physically harmed, others sexually molested as children, or savaged by war and prison, emotionally ruptured by loss of loved ones, or malevolently exploited. Their most impressive characteristics are their devious intelligence and vicious investment in violence as practice and catharsis.

Enter Lincoln Rhyme, in *The Bone Collector* (1997), a man who had been brain and brawn, his spine snapped in a crime scene investigation, his emotions long since blunted by his immersion in his work. Most of the time he lies prone on an expensive bed, using his lips to blow and suck technologies, his voice to instruct the computer that controls his environment, and his sole useable finger to help navigate his top-of-the-line personal electric wheelchair (all technologies provided by insurance or his former employer – making him a bizarre winner in the disability lottery).

Rejected by his former wife (prior to the accident) as incapable of empathy with real people, his psychic and somatic resources have been dedicated to discovering the "unsub," the "perp," the target of his probing mind, whose only role for Rhyme has been to leave traces on the landscape that he can detect, identify and deduce. The villain, the "Collector" of the title, leaves such clues to lure Rhyme to his ultimate fate.

There is nothing subtle about the device Deaver uses – a man without a body becomes a brain unmoved by passions outside his craft. His masculinity is concentrated in his searing and sarcastic insights; he is the "supercrip," those small parts of his physical body that still operate to the command of his mind, are pumped up to superhuman levels. Rhyme is the quintessential expression of the polarized archetype of patriarchy – the man as brain, authority and culture.

To balance that edifice there is a woman, who is the body. Amelie Sachs, a policewoman, is slightly goofy, tense, unsure, and offers herself to Rhyme (both symbolically and in the flesh). She is so much body, that she has to have been a Fifth Avenue model in a previous life; yet her perfect body has defects – perhaps a

psoriasis that causes her to scratch her scalp beneath her luxurious mane of red hair; her limbs, exquisite though with joints wracked by arthritis; and endometriosis that apparently prevents her ever having a baby.

She will become the vehicle through which Rhyme will realize himself again – yet he loathes himself, detests the impossibility of his flesh rising (as standing being and as erect penis). And it is this loathing that allows for a central character line to be built – and a repeated element of each of the following novels. Rhyme oscillates between the desire for death and the desire for cure – or even miniscule increase in his control over his own body. He after all is a winner in the disability lottery. As Dr Berger, the Dr Death Kevorkian figure in *The Bone Collector*, challenges Rhyme, who has hired him in to help him end his life, "You are not in pain, or homeless." Rhyme has money, a space shuttle bed, a luxury wheelchair, a 24-hour attendant who plays his psyche like a grand piano, an over-the-top van – people only should kill themselves Berger implies if they are in extreme pain, poor, and hopeless. Rhyme can still produce himself in the world, still contribute. Rhyme resists these blandishments, fighting against the enticement of life. He wants to die. And yet when his intelligence is pricked, when his mind is engaged, he cannot leave it alone. What he abandons instead is all civility, his disability an excuse to exaggerate his brusqueness and insist that all respond to his demands.

As Rhyme oscillates between desire for life and a seeking after death, the villain, the eminence noir in the novel of the moment, tries to find him and destroy him. Such a move is also programmed to intensify the dilemma for this archetypal cripple – if he dies, he wants it to be on his terms and on grounds of his choosing. But really he doesn't want to die – for example, his powerful lungs and neck muscles allow him to dispatch the prospective murderer in *The Bone Collector*, who knows that only by forcing Rhyme to want to live can he enjoy the taking of his life – there's no joy in revenge if the target wants to go. In *The Empty Chair*, he abandons the surgical operation that may either kill him or make him slightly better, to chase the villains. The chief suspect has kidnapped a young woman and maybe killed a cop – or is that the story? Is there not another plot of subterfuge and passion, corruption and disclosure lying where only his mind can discern them?

Yet the body and mind are constantly in tension. Amelie Sachs lures him on, seeking for ways to get pregnant by him, while he fears her rejection of him, so consistently rejects her. Indeed she seeks to subvert her own subjectivity, taking on his perspective and endeavouring to be him – testing herself as though she were he, putting herself quite literally at his disposal.

The crip as hero expands in each successive novel – *The Coffin Dancer* (1998), a cameo role in *The Devil's Teardrop* (1999), onto the Internet in *The Blue Nowhere* (2001) and the blockbuster of *The Stone Monkey* (2002). The Monkey puts Rhyme in a global challenge, combating a master "snakehead" smuggling Chinese dissidents into the USA. Across this more traditional thriller scenario, Deaver uses a disability perspective to lay out two competing philosophies of the body. Rhyme is a thoroughly western man – his life is about technology and his dependence and resentment of it ("a quad's life is about wires ... the rich ones at least, the lucky ones"). The choice he sees is always between cure or death, between success or failure. Those who love him spend their time trying to trick him into activating his mind in order to forget his body – and when his mind slows, his hatred of his body "understandably" resurfaces. Here we see the typical public perception of the tormented person inside a disabled body.

There is no balance here, only wild oscillation – nor is balance sought. Yet there is another path, and teasingly Rhyme finds it opening to him in one of the more (not an adverb easily used in these books so full of salacious sanguinity) bloody sequences. A symbolic Buddhist illegal Chinese – very Other to the American, and perhaps the only person able to breach his barriers sufficiently to become his friend, offers him an insight to reconciliation with himself – it is their very Otherness that allows them to connect.

Deaver/Rhyme represents one avenue through which the cultural politics of disability has found its way into the wider public mind. Deaver's assumed audience is able-bodied, so that the dilemmas are those that can stimulate readers who draw on the only cultural stereotypes they have of disability experiences. This is not to deny that Deaver has an extraordinary empathy with people with disabilities, and many repay his insight with their rapt attention.

Yet the next step in this process may be to abandon this assumption of a unitary able-bodied consciousness. The opening offered in *The Stone Monkey* takes Rhyme into a space where he is neither the lone crip nor has to be the hyper alpha male. Can Deaver learn from the reality of the lives of people with disabilities that it is possible to be fully human, in bodies that appear not to be?

His next novel, *The Vanished Man*, combines illusion and magic, in another tilt at similar windmills. Murders litter the New York landscape, all designed to lure Rhyme into a trap where the killer – also damaged goods – can demonstrate his superiority over the immobile investigator. This enemy has many appearances, yet each is a disguise, the outward manifestation merely a cloak beneath which lurks

the sinister heart. Thus, nothing, or rather no one, is really what it/they seem. All is what the confounded senses pass to the manipulated psyche, Deaver's metaphor for the wider society and its assumptions about normalcy.

## **Conclusion**

Deaver suggests that impairment of the type experienced by Rhyme creates conditions for disability that fundamentally challenge the pre-impairment personality. The process of transformation locks onto the most pronounced and deeply embedded elements of the character's psyche, in a sense polarizing his mind and setting his desire to live and create himself through investigation against his desire to die and eradicate what he fears is his failed body. Such a dichotomy has very specific implications for concepts of embodiment in cultural studies, which seldom allow damaged bodies to enter the field of concern of the troubled modern archetypal anti-hero.

While the internal debate generated by disability affects theories of embodiment, the external relations are of importance to an understanding the social fabric that operates as the "backstory" in presentations of the "normal" world. We can see in the Rhyme stories that disability is a social relationship that is implicit throughout the non-disabled world. At any moment, anyone can become impaired – their level of disability will be determined by the political economy of the disabling act, and the power and resources to which they have access. In particular their capacity to operate and survive in that world will be heavily affected by the support they have, and the affirmation of their being in the world they can receive from family, friends and the wider environment.

As the politics of disability becomes more widely disseminated in popular culture, and the Americans with Disabilities Act gains greater purchase on the public consciousness, genres such as detective fiction will face increasing expectations of inclusive narratives, and realistically diverse portrayals. Audiences will become rather more sophisticated in their reading of metaphors that mobilize disability, and may seek more complex, nuanced and human "disabled" characters.

The rising participation of disabled people in society thus challenges the regular manipulation of disabled bodies and psyches as standing for something else, and something deviant at that. As popular culture develops to encompass the increasing complexity of the everyday, the innovations starting to appear in detective fiction are likely to be manifest in a wider creative arena, with the greater participation of

disabled people as the creators of the worlds being explored.

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