# The Empty Chair Short Guide

## The Empty Chair by Jeffery Deaver

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

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# Characters

It is necessary that the characters in The Empty Chair adapt to their experiences: it is the only way they can survive. Every character in the novel is damaged both physically and emotionally. For each character— Rhyme, Sachs, Lucy, and Garrett—physical damage is the outward sign of emotional pain.

Lincoln Rhyme is a quadriplegic as the result of an accident that occurred during an investigation. He is confined to either a bed or a wheelchair fitted with numerous accouterments to help him do his work and to keep him alive—which for Rhyme is almost the same thing. While his physical condition is precarious, much of the anguish he feels is mental: What had kept Lincoln Rhyme sane since his accident—what had kept him from finding some Jack Kevorkian to help with assisted suicide—were mental challenges like this.... Lincoln Rhyme's greatest enemy wasn't the spasms, phantom pain or dysreflexia that plague spinal cord patients; it was boredom.

All Rhyme has left is his mind, but without the body to do the mind's work he feels incomplete, helpless. Rhyme's way of looking at the world—through evidence—is entirely physical, yet he is incapable of touching anything, of walking the grid of a crime scene, poring over clues. He feels his understanding of the world will be forever limited, and this causes him pain.

Rhyme is driven by his fruitless desire for contact with the physical world. Amelia Sachs is driven by something else, something she does not understand: "Sachs would scratch and pick at her flesh in an attempt to relieve the anxiety that was a dark corollary to her drive and talent." Her anxious pursuit is also for understanding, but not of evidence. She seeks understanding of something far less tangible: human nature. Her drive, her anxiety, leads her to dig her fingernails into her palms and scalp, to draw blood from her own skin. Ever since the suicide of her father, she has been struggling for understanding. Her desire to grasp human nature and what drives people brings her into conflict with Rhyme, even as she constantly tries to puzzle him out, too.

Two residents of Tanner's Corner share this quality with Sachs and Rhyme. Lucy Kerr is filled with anger, a slow-burning sense of betrayal and injustice: When they took part of her body away she'd felt ashamed and then forlorn. When her husband left she'd felt guilty and resigned. And when she finally grew mad at those events she was angry in a way that suggested embers—an anger that radiates immense heat but never bursts into flames.

Her pain is reflected in the scars on her chest. Garrett Hanlon suffers from the pain of having lost his family and of being ostracized from the town. At first people think he is just strange, calling him Insect Boy, then they come to believe he is dangerous.

He has fixated on Mary Beth McConnell because she is the only person who has ever been nice to him since the death of his parents and sister. Garrett's pain is reflected in his eyes and in the red welts covering his face, a result of toxaphene exposure.

The title of the novel refers to a psychoanalytic technique used for "understand ing certain types of behavior." A patient is seated in front of an empty chair; the patient visualizes someone important to them in the chair, someone to whom they have something that needs to be said. While the technique is used to determine why Garrett has kidnapped Mary Beth and where he has hidden her, every character in the novel has an "empty chair" they are forced to confront. For Lucy, it is Davett; she has her moment of justice when she exposes herself to Davett and his wife and daughter. For Garrett, it is his father, who he believes died angry with him. The empty chair for Sachs and Rhyme is most painful of all to confront: it is his, the empty Storm Arrow wheelchair she is forced to confront as she faces the possibility that his surgery will fail and she will lose him. In some ways, their love and need for each other is the most painful baggage Sachs and Rhyme carry.

# Social Concerns

In the North Carolina of Jeffery Deaver's novel The Empty Chair, the presence of Yankee criminologist Lincoln Rhyme and New York Police Department (NYPD) cop Amelia Sachs reminds everyone who lost the Civil War. The Tar Heel State is a different world, particularly Tanner's Corner, the community where the crimes are taking place. The Paquenoke River, or Paquo, marks the split between this community and the rest of the country. Lucy Kerr, a local deputy, says, "Normal rules don't apply to anybody north of the Paquo. Us or them. You can see yourself shooting before you read anybody their rights and that'd be perfectly all right." Crossing the Paquo leads one into a world where the rules of federal regulators and criminalists from New York with sophisticated ideas do not apply. It is a world outside the law, populated by moonshiners and swamp dwellers, and governed by corrupt law enforcement and business officials. The town is slowly being poisoned by Davett Industries, which is producing toxaphene, a pesticide declared dangerous by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Henry Davett uses the canal to ship the toxaphene to foreign markets—and to dump toxic waste. In order to obtain shipping rights, he has bought off people dwelling along the canal. Those that would not cooperate or who asked too many questions about the number of people in Tanner's Corner who are developing cancer were killed off. Among those murdered were the family of the suspect, and resident scapegoat, Garrett Hanlon.

In Tanner's Corner and the woods surrounding Blackwater Landing, where much of the novel's action occurs, the law of the wilderness applies—enforced with a hunting rifle. These are people who want the government out of their backyards. They know what is best for the community, and they reject the attempts of outsiders to impose authority. Lucy thinks, "This was crazy—a man and woman who'd probably never been in the Tar Heel State before this, two people who know nothing of the people or the geography of the area, telling lifelong residents how to do their job." The code of the law enforcement officials and the code of the swamp people are really not that different: do not tread on me. They demand the freedom to govern and regulate themselves, echoing much contemporary debate over the right of states to regulate themselves. However, the novel also reflects fears over what can happen when people are left to regulate themselves. Sometimes, they can prove to be a danger to others, to the community, and to the environment, all in the name of profit.

For the corrupt members of the town— Sheriff Jim Bell, Deputy Jesse Corn, Nurse Lydia Johansson, and Henry Davett—Sachs and Rhyme represent everything detestable about society north of the Mason-Dixon line. They are Yankees, coming to town with their "standard procedure" and sophisticated ideas, trying to tell the people of Tanner's Corner what to do; as Lucy Kerr says, "Somebody from the city doesn't really understand the woods." Further, they are from New York City, and Deaver uses every cliche about New York to set his heroes apart: Sachs learned how to use her switchblade in "wilderness training," the "wilderness" of Brooklyn. New York may seem like a lawless Babylon, but at least the rules that exist are rules that Sachs and Rhyme are familiar with. They know the territory; here they are strangers, aliens.

The streets of the city are an entirely different kind of wilderness from this sleepy town and its surrounding swampland. Deaver makes a connection between the political and social tension and alienation of North/ South, rural/urban relations, and the moral and ethical quagmire that results from an absence of regulation and the desire for profit—as a result, individual rights may go unprotected. There are several people in the novel who are used by those with political and financial power. For example, Mary Beth McConnell, Garrett's "victim," is targeted because she has gotten too curious about bones found around the canal; she believes the bones have archaeological significance when in fact they are the remains of Garrett's family. Garrett kidnaps her for her own safety, believing her to be in danger. Although his methods are problematic, he is the only character in the book who does not use Mary Beth for his own pleasure or profit.

While individuals are used and exploited throughout the novel, a more specific issue is also addressed via the toxaphene scandal: the threat of environmental destruction and public health crises that may result from industrial malfeasance and greed. A concern over the environment has become an important issue over the last several decades, with new cases continually coming to light: asbestos mining, waste from fertilizers and livestock, toxic waste dumping. Tanner's Corner is yet another victim, albeit fictional.

Upon arriving in town, Sachs notices the peculiar absence of children. At first she attributes it to suppressed maternal longings, until she realizes that despite the growth of new residential areas with large new houses, there are no families moving into any of the houses, no children playing in the yards. The houses are not the homes of young new couples seeking to start families in a pleasant small town. They are houses that have been bought with the bribes from the Davett Industries, paid to families in exchange for shipping rights on the canal. The people of the town are sterile, and the few children that do live there are dying of cancer. The terrifying truth about Tanner's Corner is foreshadowed at the beginning of the novel by a child's funeral that Sachs and Rhyme pass on their way to town. More illnesses are revealed. Deputy Lucy Kerr, who allows herself to use Sachs as a confidante, tells how she lost both breasts to a radical mastectomy. She also lost her husband and any chance she may have had to bear children. Once cancer strikes as a direct consequence of the dealings of Davett Industries, Lucy is left with nothing but anger and a desire for justice.

As more cases come to light there is greater public awareness and concern that safety, health, and human rights are sacrificed to profit and greed. These concerns are coupled with a fear that if industry and municipalities are left to police themselves, then regulation will be of such little importance that the individual will have nowhere to turn. Tanner's Corner, described as a hornet's nest, is a place where responsibility and accountability have been replaced with corruption and fear.

# Techniques

Like many suspense/thriller novelists, Deaver uses multiple points of view to lead the reader through the Great Dismal Swamp with each group of characters: Rich Culbeau and his gang of rednecks seeking the reward offered by Mary Beth's mother; Mason Germain, who is desperate to find Garrett in order to advance his career; and Lucy Kerr, Jesse Corn, and the other deputies.

Through this technique, the differing motives the many characters who are searching for Mary Beth and Garrett are revealed.

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Garrett has become a scapegoat for the town. Deaver uses the trope of the scapegoat to show all that is wrong in the town, and how the inhabitants of Tanner's Corner pin blame for all the wrongs on the boy. A community can use a scapegoat as a receptacle for fears and guilt; the scapegoat is then destroyed, taking these negative forces with it. Scapegoats function as a way to preserve a community, appearing throughout mythology, folklore, and literature. The community of Tanner's Corner uses Garrett, a peculiar, unattractive outsider, to receive all the blame for what has gone wrong. He is pursued, hunted, so that he may be captured and destroyed.

One of the qualities that makes Garrett so strange is his fascination with insects.

Deaver uses insects as a leitmotif, or recurring symbol, for a main theme of the book: the human capacity to adapt. Deaver represents this quality in his characters by employing insects as a recurring trope. As Garrett reads from one of his many books on insects, "A healthy creature strives to grow and develop. A healthy creature strives to survive. A healthy creature strives to adapt to its environment." He goes on to say, "I read that and it was like, wow, I could be like that. I could be healthy and normal again." The creatures of the swamp become important symbols in The Empty Chair.

# Themes

The novel begins with the arrival of Sachs and Rhyme at the Neurological Research Institute at the Medical Center of the University of North Carolina. After several years in a wheelchair, only able to move his left ring finger, Rhyme is undergoing an experimental surgery that could restore some use to his broken body. Although the surgery is risky, Rhyme chooses to go ahead, thinking, "The overwhelming burden of his injury was the heaviest when it came to the small tasks that a healthy person does without thinking." He interrogates his own reasons for having it: So why was he doing it? Oh, there was a very good reason. Yet it was a reason that the cold criminalist in him had trouble accepting and one that he would never dare utter out loud. Because it had nothing to do with being able to prowl over a crime scene searching for evidence. Nothing to do with brushing his teeth or sitting up in bed. No, no, it was exclusively because of Amelia Sachs.

This decision illustrates a major theme of the novel: the human need and capacity for adaptation. Characters in the novel must learn to get outside their assumptions and preconceived notions. They must also recognize that a person is not predetermined by his or her past. Everyone has the capacity to adapt, to change, to grow.

The setting of the novel and the process by which its secrets are revealed exemplify the necessity of moving beyond assumptions and adapting understanding to the revelation of new evidence. Tanner's Corner seems to be a sleepy little Southern town. Main Street is its center; everyone knows everyone else and has for decades.

Here, Sachs and Rhyme are the "fish out of water." Rhyme bemoans having to study evidence and solve a crime in a place he is unfamiliar with: As Rhyme took in all these details of smalltown life he realized with dismay how out of his depth as a criminalist he was here.

He could successfully analyze evidence in New York because he'd lived there for so many years—had pulled the city apart, walked its streets, studied its history and flora and fauna. But here, in Tanner's Corner and environs, he knew nothing of the soil, the air, the water, nothing of the habits of the residents, the cars they liked, the houses they lived in, the industries that employed them, the lusts that drove them.

He tries to come to the crime scene as a blank slate, a tabula rasa upon which he can trace the process of deduction as he traces the gathering of evidence on his blackboard.

Yet he has no way of putting the evidence he finds into a larger context. He is a fish out of water, unfamiliar with the geography and history of this place he has come to help. Rhyme is forced to fit the evidence he finds—bloody tissues, limestone, ammonia, camphene, fishing line, cheese crackers— into categories he is familiar with: "Lincoln Rhyme wasn't a gambling man at all. He was a scientist who lived his life according to quantifiable, documented principles."

However, as new evidence comes to light, as the web of corruption is revealed to be woven through the whole town, Rhyme must adapt. He must look at the evidence with new eyes, always from a fresh perspective. The novel illustrates the tension between what the characters know and what they think they know.

This tension is further illustrated by the relationship between Sachs and Rhyme. The need to adapt is shown to be important not only for understanding the world, but also for sustaining personal relationships. Unlike Rhyme, who relies on evidence and what can be learned from the physical world, Sachs is open to the endless possibilities and problems created by human emotion, instinct, and motivation. For Sachs, an understanding of the world cannot be reduced solely to empirical evidence: Lincoln Rhyme disparaged her for being a 'people cop' and warned that it would be her downfall. He extolled her talent as a criminalist and, though she wasa talented forensic scientist, in her heart she was just like her father; for Amelia Sachs the best type of evidence was that found in the human heart.

It is this consideration which leads her to help Garrett; even though all evidence suggests otherwise, she believes he is innocent.

The escape of Sachs and Garrett bewilders Rhyme; he cannot fit the action into the conception he has of his protege, colleague, and lover. In order to help find her and save her from prosecution he has to adjust his idea of her and of the crimes. Over the course of the novel he also has to adjust to the realities of their relationship. Pondering his operation, he thinks, "He'd grown terrified of losing her.... This was inevitable, he figured, as long as he remained as immobile as he was. She wanted children. She wanted a normal life. And so Rhyme was willing to risk death, to risk making his condition worse, in the hope that he could improve." The personal relationship between the two characters evolves even as the professional relationship is endangered: the two are intertwined, and require constant adaptation. Likewise, Sachs realizes that she, too, is changing, and fears her relationship with Rhyme will not be able to adapt. She reflects on her own past and realizes a desire to have children. The novel explores the question of whether Rhyme and Sachs can adapt as individuals, as colleagues, as lovers.

Making sacrifices and coming to terms with the past are important parts of adapting. In Tanner's Corner, individuals are sacrificed for corporate greed. As Sheriff Bell, one of the key law enforcement officials behind the Dayett Industries scheme, says, "It's risky when you bargain with the devil.... But, far as I'm concerned, life's just one big trade-off." However, sacrifices made for others out of a sense of responsibility, justice, or love are valued. Characters help others and grow as people by making sacrifices. These acts are opposed to the greed and lust for profits that drive Davett Industries to sacrifice individuals. When Lucy confronts Davett at the end of the novel, telling him he will be prosecuted for what he had done, she holds him personally responsible for what happened to her.

Addressing his wife and daughter, she says, "'I'd like you to see what Henry did.' Her strong hands ripped her own shirt open.

The women in the car gaped at the pink scars where her breasts had been.... Lucy said, 'You said that you don't make mistakes, Davett? ... Wrong. You made this one." Lucy Kerr was sacrificed for profit, losing her health and her family; she turns her anger into the energy that helps solve Garrett's case. Sachs sacrifices her job and the life she wants with Rhyme to help Garrett, another victim of Davett's corruption. Lucy, Sachs, and Garrett are vindicated by the revelation of Davett's crime.

This enables Lucy and Garrett to come to terms with what they have lost. Furthermore, it enables Sachs to come to terms with the part she thought she played in the crimes: helping Garrett to escape and shooting Jesse Corn. The self-doubt she feels as a cop, the memory of her dead father and the guilt she feels over letting that memory down, are somewhat resolved by the discovery that the sacrifices she made were for the best.

Like the insects Garrett is so fascinated with, the characters in the novel have an overwhelming capacity for adaptation. It is this capacity that enables them to survive and triumph over the hornet's nest that is Tanner's Corner.

# Key Questions

Jeffery Deaver combines scientific research and discussion of criminology with a sympathetic portrayal of a paralyzed man who struggles to do a job that requires all the senses and full mobility. The gathering and analysis of evidence is key to Deaver's plots, but the twist is that the person responsible for—and most skilled at—deciphering that evidence faces seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

1. Rhyme is hindered from doing what he loves because of physical disability. Analyze Deaver's portrayal of Rhyme's physical state. Does it seem accurate?

Fair? How do other characters in the novel respond to Rhyme's situation?

How does he overcome his disability?

2. Deaver presents a conflict between what the mind is capable of and what the body is capable of. Examine the mindbody duality in the novel. How is Rhyme able to transcend his situation through his mind? To what extent is it impossible for him to use his own mind to escape his body?

3. American folklore and mythology are important in the novel. Discuss the ways Deaver uses these stories in The Empty Chair. Why are these stories so important? How do the characters see themselves as part of these stories, particularly Mary Beth McConnell? How does the use of history of the South in The Empty Chair compare to the use of history of New York City in The Bone Collector?

4. The people of Tanner's Corner are victims of corporate greed. Davett Industries cares nothing about environmental or health hazards as it produces its dangerous pesticide. How does the novel reflect contemporary worries about corporate contamination of the environment and failure of regulation?

5. Deaver employs several sophisticated literary techniques throughout the novel.

Analyze the use of the leitmotif of insects, the use of the symbol of the empty chair, the use of the trope of the scapegoat.

# Literary Precedents

Deaver's novel fits into the tradition of cat-and-mouse suspense thrillers such as those written by James Patterson or Ridley Pearson. However, while other suspense thrillers may rely on detailed examinations of police procedure, Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme novels, like The Empty Chair, are different in that they are heavily scientific. There is extensive explanation of forensic techniques reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes stories.

Details about chemical compounds and fingerprints are crucial to the narrative. The use of physical ailments and wounds could be compared to an author such as Edgar Allan Poe or Nathaniel Hawthorne, where outward appearance corresponds to inward anguish, unhappiness, or sin.

In The Empty Chair, Deaver also uses American folklore extensively. Stories such as the tale of the lost settlers at Roanoke and the story of the White Doe, a myth about an Indian princess turned into a deer, are important for the setting. They also serve to set Sachs and Rhyme apart from the locals as outsiders unfamiliar with the history and collective memory of the people of Tanner's Corner.

# Related Titles

The Empty Chair is the third in a series of Lincoln Rhyme novels. The first, The Bone Collector, appeared in 1997. It introduces the paralyzed criminalist in a story where a serial killer leaves clues that can only be solved by someone intimately familiar with nineteenth-century New York—which, of course, Rhyme is. The novel establishes Rhyme's expertise, and it is interesting to compare Rhyme's encyclopedic knowledge of the city with the "fish out of water" he becomes in the North Carolina swamps of The Empty Chair. The Bone Collector also introduces the young cop who will become Rhyme's protege, Amelia Sachs. The Coffin Dancer, published in 1998, is the case of a psychotic killer who has chameleon-like qualities, allowing him to blend into any setting. This presents a real challenge for Rhyme as he struggles with evidence leading to a killer with no identity. In this book, his intimacy with Sachs is developed further and the two become soul mates. She becomes an increasingly necessary part of his work as his disability grows harder to bear, as seen in The Empty Chair. At the beginning of the series, Rhyme seriously considers ending his own life; his reluctance to do so grows with each book as he also grows closer to Amelia.

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