

Just Mercy

A Story of Justice and Redemption

By Bryan Stevenson

Discussion Questions

1. Stevenson remembers his grandmother telling him throughout his childhood, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.” How do we see the author getting close to issues of punishment and mass incarceration throughout the book? What are some examples of Stevenson getting close to the incarcerated people he works with? How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect his life? Stevenson writes that injustice occurs when “we allow fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us.” As you begin your collegiate studies, how will you get close to the issues that are most important to you?
2. After working with low-income and incarcerated people for many years, Stevenson came to believe that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.” How do you see poverty affecting people’s lives in *Just Mercy*? Are there any examples of poverty and justice existing at the same time? What are some of the different meanings of the word “just” used throughout the book? Have Stevenson’s experiences influenced your own definition of justice?
3. One of the most powerful moments in the book is when Stevenson experiences a mental and emotional breakdown. But this breakdown becomes a pivotal moment in his work for he recognizes his and societies’ collective brokenness, and their response to weakness: “We’ve become so fearful and vengeful that we’ve thrown away children, discarded the disabled, and sanctioned the imprisonment of the sick and the weak—not because they are a threat to public safety or beyond rehabilitation but because we think it makes us seem tough, less broken.” How did this realization ultimately aid Stevenson? Do you agree with this realization? Does society need to somehow find our way to that point in order to move forward and heal? (University of Illinois Chicago)
4. Readers from varied backgrounds will approach this book with different knowledge and experiences. Did Stevenson’s examples resonate with you, or were you shocked? Is the book an eye-opener for you, or validation of what you already knew? Consider how your reaction would differ if you were of a different race or class; were the victim of a serious crime; or had personal experience with the justice system. (University of Wisconsin)
5. Do you think Stevenson had any idea that representing indigent, incarcerated people was going to be his life’s work? How did he take care of himself while doing difficult and exhausting work? What did he struggle with and what kept him from quitting as he “beat the drum for justice?” As you begin to pursue your own college career and then your life’s work, how will you stay energized without burning out?
6. In the epilogue, Stevenson writes, “The real question of capital punishment in this country is, do we deserve to kill?” What was your opinion about capital punishment prior to reading this book? Did reading *Just Mercy* change your opinion about whether or not the United States has the right to execute its citizens? What other questions did this book raise about capital punishment?

7. Stevenson writes that there are four primary institutions that shape the conversation around race and justice today: slavery, racial terror and the threat of violence against people of color, Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation, and mass incarceration. How do you see these institutions affecting cases throughout the book? What examples of racial discrimination within the legal system can you find within the text? How do we see the history of racial bias in the United States impacting prisons today?
8. The *New York Times* says *Just Mercy* “reads like a call to action.” Stevenson calls for increasing the salaries of teachers, law enforcement, and social workers in an interview with National Public Radio. Are you compelled to take action after reading the book? If so, what would that action look like? Are there local or national groups that you would work with to make your action more powerful? (University of Wisconsin)

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