



JUST MERCY: A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

2016 NC State Common Reading Selection

Created by the Common Reading Selection Committee to assist first-year students in understanding *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson, this guide is meant to provide some questions to consider as you read, as well as help in keeping the cast of characters straight. While the questions posed are not discipline-specific, you are encouraged to consider how the text relates to your future academic studies and the real world applications the text may present.

We hope you enjoy *Just Mercy* as much as your faculty and staff do and plan on joining us to hear Bryan Stevenson speak at Convocation on **Monday, August 15th at the PNC Arena**.

ENGAGE WITH *JUST MERCY*

- READ** *Just Mercy* before returning in August
- WATCH** Bryan Stevenson's [Ted Talk](#) and [interview on the Daily Show](#) to learn more about Bryan's work
- SHARE** your experience with the book through Twitter and Instagram with **#OnePackOneBook**
- HEAR** Bryan Stevenson address the **Class of 2020** at Convocation on Monday, August 15th
- PARTICIPATE** in book related events (check out go.ncsu.edu/commonreading for upcoming events!)
- APPLY** connected course material and themes from the book to impact your community

RESOURCES AVAILABLE WHEN READING

Need to speak with someone while reading *Just Mercy*? Resources are available to assist you if you need to debrief while reading. Visit each resource's website to learn more.

Counseling Center

Resources available to address academic, social and emotional concerns that may impact students overall well-being.

counseling.dasa.ncsu.edu

Women's Center

Learn about resources addressing gender equity and social justice through education, advocacy and leadership development.

oied.ncsu.edu/Womens-Center/

GLBT Center

Learn more about resources available to members of the GLBT community and their allies to affirm identities and build community.

oied.ncsu.edu/glbtc

Multicultural Student Affairs

Learn about programs to expand cultural horizons while honoring respective cultural experiences.

oied.ncsu.edu/MSA

Diversity Coordinators

Learn more about the diversity opportunities within your academic college

newstudents.dasa.ncsu.edu/colleges

Alcohol & Other Drugs

Resources available to reduce the harm and unwanted consequences of alcohol and other drug use.

alcohol.dasa.ncsu.edu



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN READING

(Discussion questions taken from Penguin Random House Academic Resources' *Freshman Year Reading/Common Reading Guide*. The full guide with discussion questions can be found online at <https://newstudents.dasa.ncsu.edu/commonreading/students>.)

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. 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?
3. What examples did Stevenson share of low-income individuals and/or people of color in difficult circumstances being presumed guilty before presenting their cases? He writes, "Executions are an example of how policies and norms are used to control and punish blacks." Why are 80% of people on death row convicted of crimes against whites while 65% of homicide victims are black? Why is a death sentence more likely if a defendant is black and the victim is white? Do you think race and class should factor into a court case? Please explain your reasoning.
4. In 2010, in *Graham v. Florida*, the Supreme Court ruled that sentencing juveniles to life without parole for non-homicides is unconstitutional. And in 2012, in *Miller v. Alabama* and *Jackson v. Hobbs*, the Supreme Court ruled that juveniles convicted of murder cannot be subject to a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. According to the ACLU, approximately 2,570 children, some as young as 13 years old, have been sentenced to life without parole in the United States. How does incarceration affect children differently than adults? Do you agree with Stevenson that punishments for children are "intense and reactionary"? Should all juvenile offenders sentenced to life without parole be eligible for a new sentencing hearing? How should families of victims murdered by juveniles be involved in sentencing hearings, if at all? What difficulties or complications could arise within the system if all juveniles sentenced to life without parole are granted new hearings?
5. Many prisoners who have spent years on death row or in solitary confinement describe their experience as being buried alive. Prisoners are often subjected to rape, assault, and violence and have an increased risk of suicide. What protections should exist for incarcerated people? Do you believe that putting someone in uninterrupted solitary confinement for 18 years, as we read in the case of Ian Manuel, is ever warranted? Do you believe additional protections should exist for juveniles? What kind of punishment, if any, should exist in prisons?
6. What factors prevent mitigating evidence (information about a person's background and upbringing that may reduce punishment for an offense) from being presented at trial? Why would a judge or a jury lack interest in significant, compelling mitigating evidence? Do you believe Richardson's sentence would have been different if evidence was presented on his history of abuse, mental illness, PTSD, and military service? What does Stevenson mean when he writes, "We all need mitigation at some point"?



7. In 1996, people with drug convictions were banned from receiving public benefits including housing, welfare, and student loans. Two thirds of women in prison are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes, many for writing bad checks or committing minor property crimes. Stevenson charges that these policy changes have “created a new class of untouchables.” What are some of the consequences of this class division? What factors lead to an increase in felony charges for nonviolent offenses? Do you think race and class affect sentencing for nonviolent offenses?
8. 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?

“The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

**BRYAN STEVENSON, AUTHOR OF JUST MERCY
#ONEPACKONEBOOK**



CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Listed here in order of appearance)

Bryan Stevenson	(pg. 3)	The author of <i>Just Mercy</i> . We first meet Bryan as he is traveling alone to visit a condemned man on Georgia's death row as part of a law school internship with the Southern Prisoner's Defense Committee (SPDC). As a Harvard Law School student, this experience changes the course of Bryan's professional. Key quote from page 6: "Them without the capital get the punishment" (Steve Bright, Director of the SPDC).
Steven Bright	(pg. 5)	Director of the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee where Bryan Stevenson interned in 1983.
Henry (Prisoner)	(pg. 9)	Condemned man on Georgia's death row who inspires Bryan through his compassion and gratitude. Henry sang "Higher Ground" as he was escorted from the prison visitation room.
Walter McMillian	(pg. 17)	Convicted of murder in Alabama, his story becomes the focus of <i>Just Mercy</i> . While maintaining and fighting for his innocence with Bryan as his attorney, he endures time in solitary confinement and death row throughout his multi-year incarceration.
Robert E. Lee Key	(pg. 19)	Alabama judge who contacts Bryan in an attempt to have Bryan withdraw his defense of Walter McMillian. Accuses Walter McMillian of being a member of the "Dixie Mafia" and "one of the biggest drug dealers in South Alabama".
Harper Lee	(pg. 23)	The author of the book <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> .
Karen Kelley	(pg. 26)	Friend of Walter McMillian.
Charlie Bliss	(pg. 35)	Bryan's law-school classmate and colleague.
Lourida Ruffin	(pg. 37)	Beaten by officers in Gadsden, AL.
Thomas Tate	(pg. 47)	Sheriff.
Ralph Myers	(pg. 31)	Friend of Karen Kelley. He told a far-fetched story and changed his story at key moments.
Michael McDonald	(pg. 48)	Man from Mobile; accused of shooting a police officer.
Ted Pearson	(pg. 49)	District Attorney.
Ronda Morrison	(pg. 49)	The victim Walter was convicted of murdering.
Bill Hooks	(pg. 50)	Man known jailhouse "snitch" who testified against Walter.
John Evans	(pg. 54)	Convicted murderer who was electrocuted a second time, since the electric chair malfunctioned initially.
L.J. Chestnut	(pg. 56)	One of the attorneys who first tried to help Walter McMillian.
Bruce Boynton	(pg. 56)	One of the attorneys who first tried to help Walter McMillian.
Eva Ansley	(pg. 67)	Woman who opened law practice with the author in Tuscaloosa, AL.
Michael Lindsey	(pg. 69)	Convict on death row.
Horace Dunkins	(pg. 69)	Convict on death row; his execution by electric chair was botched because the electrodes had not been connected properly.
David Bagwell	(pg. 69)	Lawyer who got disillusioned about death row cases and concluded, "mad dogs out to die".
Herbert Richardson	(pg. 72)	Convict on death row, Vietnam veteran, suffering from PTSD, assembled a bomb, which was detonated "by mistake" by a 10-year-old.
Brenda Lewis	(pg. 84)	Investigator working with Bryan Stevenson.
Armelia Hand	(pg. 92)	Walter McMillian's older sister.
Minnie Belle McMillian	(pg. 94)	Walter's Wife.
Jackson Miles	(pg. 95)	The "old man" who might have committed the crime, according to Minnie.
Rick Blair	(pg. 95)	The "new owner" who might have committed the crime, according to Jackie.
Jackie McMillian	(pg. 95)	Walter's daughter.
Giles	(pg. 98)	Walter's nephew.
Sam Crook	(pg. 102)	A rebel, a friend of Walter, interesting guy.
Darnell Houston	(pg. 105)	Said he could prove Walter's innocence. Said Bill Hooks did not drive by the cleaner's, since he was working with Bill.
Joe Hightower	(pg. 106)	State's witness, not credible.
Tom Chapman	(pg. 107)	The new DA for Monroe City.



Charlie	(pg. 117)	14-year-old boy who killed George, his mother's boyfriend.
George	(pg. 117)	Police officer, drunk boyfriend of Charlie's mother.
Michael O'Connor	(pg. 130)	Yale law school graduate.
Clay Kast	(pg. 132)	Mechanic who modified Walter's truck to a "low rider" six months after the murder.
Vic Pittman	(pg. 139)	Man implicated as a suspect in Vickie Pittman's death.
Mozelle and Onzelle	(pg. 142)	Walter's aunts who felt that the authorities were ignoring their input.
Trina Garnett	(pg. 148)	14-year-old, set fire by accident, raped in jail, spent 35 years in prison.
Walter Garnett	(pg. 148)	Former boxer, abusive alcoholic.
Edith Garnett	(pg. 148)	Walter Garnett's wife.
Ian Manuel	(pg. 151)	13-year-old, shot a woman, called a "cutter" in jail.
Antonio Nunez	(pg. 154)	Accomplice in kidnapping, as a 13-year-old.
George Stinney	(pg. 157)	14-year-old, search party, electrocuted.
Brenda Lewis	(pg. 163)	Former Montgomery police officer, working now with Bryan.
Don Valeska	(pg. 164)	Prosecutor, intense ad combative.
Thomas B. Norton, Jr.	(pg. 171)	New judge already tired of pretrial requests.
Mrs. Williams	(pg. 176)	Older black woman, elegant, afraid of police dog.
Avery Jenkins	(pg. 186)	Mentally ill, incoherent.
George Daniel	(pg. 189)	Mentally ill, brain damage from a car accident; police tried to remove him from a house and he shot the officer. Federal court overturned his conviction.
Un-named guard	(pg. 194)	Owner of the truck with Confederate bumper stickers, who initially gave Bryan a hard time when he was visiting the prison.
Bernard Harcourt	(pg. 207)	New attorney working with Bryan on Walter's case, for Harvard Law School.
Walt Harrington	(pg. 210)	Washington Post journalist.
Pete Earley	(pg. 211)	60 Minutes reporter, CBS.
David Gerber	(pg. 211)	60 Minutes producer, CBS.
Tom Taylor	(pg. 214)	ABI investigator.
Greg Cole	(pg. 214)	ABI investigator.
Marsha Colbey	(pg. 227)	NYC sidewalk incident with the gown, still-born child.
Debbie Cook	(pg. 230)	Had someone call the police asking "Where is the baby?"
Kethleen Enste	(pg. 230)	Forensic pathologist, exhumed baby's body.
Dr. Dennis McNally	(pg. 231)	Doctor who testified that there was a high risk of miscarriage due to lack of pre-natal care.
Dr. Werner Spriz	(pg. 231)	Author
Charlotte Morrison	(pg. 239)	Rhodes Scholar, attorney.
Kristin Nelson	(pg. 239)	Harvard Law, attorney.
Clarence Brantley	(pg. 242)	Exonerated in 1990, actually innocent.
Randall Dale Adams	(pg. 242)	Exonerated, featured in "The Thin Blue Line."
Rob McDuff	(pg. 246)	White attorney with Southern charm.
Michael Gulley	(pg. 256)	15-year-old housebreaker.
Nathan McCants	(pg. 256)	17-year-old housebreaker.
Joe Sullivan	(pg. 256)	13-year-old housebreaker accused of rape.
Ashley Jones	(pg. 264)	14-year-old, killing of family members.