

# Book Club Kits!



## About the Author:

**Byran Stevenson** has been representing capital defendants and death row prisoners in the deep south since 1985, when he was a staff attorney with the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia. Since 1989, he has been executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a private, nonprofit law organization he founded that focuses on social justice and human rights in the context of criminal justice reform in the United States. EJI litigates on behalf of condemned prisoners, juvenile offenders, people wrongly convicted or charged, poor people denied effective representation, and others whose trials are marked by racial bias or prosecutorial misconduct.

Stevenson's work has won him national acclaim. Some of his awards include the 1991 ACLU National Medal of Liberty, the 1996 Public Interest Lawyer of the year, the 2004 Award for Courageous Advocacy, and the 2015 Carnegie Medal for Best Non-Fiction for his book, *Just Mercy*.

Stevenson has served as part of the clinical faculty at NYU Law School since 1998.

[https://its.law.nyu.edu/facultyprofiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=profile.biography&personid\\_20215](https://its.law.nyu.edu/facultyprofiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=profile.biography&personid_20215)



## Inside the kit:

- (8) book copies
- (1) book club guide

## About the Book:

*From Goodreads:*

Bryan Stevenson was a young lawyer when he founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending those most desperate and in need: the poor, the wrongly condemned, and women and children trapped in the farthest reaches of our criminal justice system. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillian, a young man who was sentenced to die for a notorious murder he insisted he didn't commit. The case drew Bryan into a tangle of conspiracy, political machinations, and legal brinkmanship—and transformed his understanding of mercy and justice forever.

JUST MERCY is at once an unforgettable account of an idealistic, gifted young lawyer's coming of age, a moving window into the lives of those he has defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of justice.

## Suggested Reads:

Beam, Chris

*To the End of June: The Intimate Life of American Foster Care*

Benforado, Adam

*Unfair*

Coates, Ta-Nehisi

*Between the World and Me*

Desmond, Matthew

*Evicted*

Mandery, Evan

*A Wild Injustice: The Death and Resurrection of Capital Punishment in America*

1. *Just Mercy* begins with information about Bryan Stevenson growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. He remembers his grandmother telling him, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close” (14). How does Stevenson get close to the incarcerated people he is helping? How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect Stevenson’s life? Can you be an effective criminal lawyer without getting close?
2. As a result of his extensive work with low income and incarcerated people, Stevenson concludes that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice” (18). What does this statement mean? What examples in the book inform Stevenson’s position on poverty and justice? What is justice? What does ‘*Just Mercy*’ mean?
3. Stevenson describes numerous workarounds within the United States legal system. We learn that nearly every prisoner on death row had been tried by an all-white or nearly all-white jury, despite a Supreme Court ruling in the 19th century that declared excluding black people from jury duty unconstitutional. Why do you think black people are excluded from the juries of black defendants? What factors should influence jury selection?
4. The McMillian case took six years to get a court to ultimately overturn the conviction. Is there a lack of humility in our justice system? In America? Why does it take so much time, effort and perseverance to get the legal system to confront its mistakes? How could this be changed?
5. Stevenson provides examples of defendants whose mental illness is never mentioned at trial. Why do you think mental illness often goes unaddressed at trial? Should it be considered? If so, what are fair ways to try/treat individuals with mental health issues? What is our responsibility to people with mental health issues when these individuals become involved in the justice system?
6. 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.
7. The United States’ use of the death penalty differs from other countries’ use. For instance, Germany abolished the death penalty after the Holocaust. In India, where the death penalty is legal, only a handful of criminals have been executed since the turn of the century. What do you know about other countries and their position on and enforcement of capital punishment? How might politics, religion, culture and/or history play a role?
8. In *The New York Times*, Ted Conover says Stevenson: “has the defense lawyer's reflex of refusing to acknowledge his clients' darker motives. A teenager convicted of a double murder by arson is relieved of agency; a man who placed a bomb on his estranged girlfriend's porch, inadvertently killing her niece, 'had a big heart.'” Stevenson believes the bomb builder never intended for the bomb to explode. Does it matter whether Stevenson’s clients are truthful? Should their honesty affect how well he defends them? Why?
9. What did this book teach you about the legal process in the United States that you did not know already? What questions do you still have, and how might you find the answers? What resources are available for people in Madison who need help navigating the legal system?
10. *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?