
**Book Review: *Just Mercy: A True Story of The Fight for Justice*
by Bryan Stevenson**

*Emely Gavini**Department of Sociology**California State University, Los Angeles*

Imagine having to spend 6 years in prison for a crime you did not commit. Now imagine being executed on death row for a crime you did not commit. The true story of Walter McMillian and other innocent people of color on death row would infuriate anyone who truly supports justice being served. McMillian's lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, released over 140 wrongfully convicted prisoners on death row. Walter's story in the 2015 book *Just Mercy: A True Story of the Fight for Justice* is just a mere glimpse of what Bryan Stevenson's time as a lawyer truly entailed.

The author, Bryan Stevenson, is an American lawyer, social justice activist, and law professor at New York University School of Law. He is also the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative. He is not only brilliant for the way he authors the book *Just Mercy*, captivating the readers with diligence, but also for how he advocates for the people he represented in court and what the people he represented did for him unknowingly. The author is ingenious for not only serving imprisoned men without being paid a penny by the families but also for spreading the word on the injustices he had to face as a Black man himself back in Alabama in the late 1980s. Publishing his memoir out there was the best decision he could have made to raise awareness about these injustices and the fulfillment of serving justice for the underrepresented and wrongfully convicted. The book has several strengths, beginning with its advocacy for the truth. People often like to turn away from the truth because it can be ugly and horrendous, and no one wants to recognize it so that they can continue living comfortably. However, as we learn from this story, the truth will also save lives, and there is no limit to advocacy when it is the truth. If there is anything to learn about this book, it would be patience and perseverance to find what is right.

The criminal justice system at the time of this story failed so many people of color, especially Black men. The book *Just*

Mercy begins with the story of Walter McMillian in 1987 when he was arrested and convicted to death row for murdering an 18-year-old white woman. Yet, Walter was nowhere near the place of the crime when it occurred. Unfortunately, during the time of the crime, Black people were afraid to speak up to authorities because of the consequences it would bring to them and their families. Instead of fighting the allegations, Walter McMillian knew that his fate was set as it came down to his word vs. a white man's word. During the time that Walter was awaiting his execution, we learned of the injustices that had also been pinned on other people of color just like Walter. Other innocent men of color who also had just accepted their fate on death row simply because they never had hope to begin with. As a Black man himself, Bryan Stevenson saw himself in his clients. The frustration imposed on him by the judicial system inspired him, even more, to give some sense of hope to the innocent, as well as simply stating the truth and advocating for them since they were poorly represented at the time of their initial conviction.

The book proceeds through a series of stories that begin with the author experiencing his first execution of one of his clients, Herbert Richardson, by electric chair for a crime that he did not commit. In all of Stevenson's best efforts, he could not stop Herbert's execution. Stevenson's experience with Herbert made him even more determined to get the resources to help the following clients he represented in the following years. Throughout the book, Stevenson faces discrimination for the color of his skin, and he faces racism simply for supporting his own race. Stevenson's partner and ally, Eva Ansley, faces threats as well, especially since she was a white woman collaborating with a Black man to get wrongfully convicted felons of color on death row released. She stood by Stevenson as a white woman who was also tired of the discrimination she was forced to be surrounded by every day. For the underrepresented Black community, it was the entire world against their own words. They are surrounded by corrupt officers who are in it out of loyalty to their corrupted leaders who dictate what to do, or they will kill their families or put them in jail, too.

It is people like Bryan Stevenson who give the world hope in a dark place that seems almost hopeless. Stevenson's equal

justice initiative in Alabama brought a small amount of reform into an entire country that was corrupt. It, of course, took the help of Stevenson's allies, who made everything possible. Advocacy is an especially important theme in this story as Stevenson advocates for others who inspire him to learn more about himself. This represents how important it is to stand together to spread the truth. Spreading awareness in the original time that the events occurred seemed almost impossible, as people of color were afraid to stand up for themselves, let alone for others. Resistance is also a particularly important theme, as Stevenson's resistance to the way the system was functioning saved so many lives. Unfortunately, these themes highlight a very dark history that has now led to mass incarceration simply because of prejudices.

Just Mercy is a gripping story – simple, suspenseful, upsetting, and fulfilling all in one. Walter's story moves the audience in a way that makes one question their life choices – even when innocent. That is what corruption can do to a man: change you, make you believe that you are the problem, and belittle you to the point where you are afraid to speak up for what's right, even if a person's life is at stake. These real-life events reminded us that racism is an issue that started long ago and is still practiced today. As people try to justify it, it is important to advocate for one another, especially for the truth. The significance behind the story is of extremely high importance as it advocates for justice being served.

REFERENCES

Stevenson, Bryan. 2015. *Just Mercy: A True Story of the Fight for Justice*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

Emely Gavini Mendez (She/Her/Ella) is a Sociology, MA Graduate student at Cal State LA. She attended San Bernardino Valley College and received four Associates Degrees: Administration of Justice, Humanities and Fine Arts, Social and Behavioral Sciences and Sociology. She proudly transferred over to Cal State LA and pursued her B.A. degree in Sociology and graduated in less than two years. Emely's final Thesis project focuses on family dynamics and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected those dynamics. Emely will be graduating with her M.A. degree in Sociology during May 2024 as a proud published student on the CSF Editorial Board in hopes to continue her passion for writing.