Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption
by Bryan Stevenson

This guide is designed for instructors who want to build reading assignments around prevalent themes within this book. The final two chapters of Just Mercy sum up many of Stevenson’s overarching observations about justice, mercy, and racial differences as indicated by the following excerpts:

1. “We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent…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…But simply punishing the broken—walking away from them or hiding them from sight—only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too” (p. 289-90).

2. “The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It’s when mercy is least expected that it’s most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration” (p. 294).

3. “I believe that so much of our worst thinking about justice is steeped in the myths of racial difference that still plague us. I believe that there are four institutions in American history that have shaped our approach to race and justice but remain poorly understood.”

According to Stevenson, these four institutions are:
1. Slavery
2. Racial Terror
   a. “lynching created modern death penalty”
   b. convict leasing—see Douglas Blackmon’s Slavery by Another Name
   c. racial hierarchy
3. Jim Crow
   a. legalized racial segregation
   b. legacy of racial profiling
4. Mass Incarceration
   a. “overrepresentation of people of color”
   b. “disproportionate sentencing of…minorities”
   c. “targeted prosecution of drug crimes in poor communities”
   d. “criminalization of new immigrants/undocumented people”
   e. “collateral consequences of voter disenfranchisement” (pp. 299-301)
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<td><strong>1 “Mockingbird Players”</strong>&lt;br&gt;Introduces Walter McMillian’s story &amp; history of Jim Crow policies; racial hierarchies.</td>
<td>• Prevalence of improper legal representation (in this case the judge trying to turn Stevenson off the case): pp. 20–21&lt;br&gt;• Connection between McMillian’s story and Tom Robinson in <em>To Kill a Mockingbird</em>: pp. 23–24&lt;br&gt;• History of slavery and racial hierarchy in Alabama:&lt;br&gt;  o Economics: pp. 24–25; Anti-miscegenation: pp. 27-29; Lynching/violence against men of color: pp. 29–30&lt;br&gt;• McMillian as threat (tied into historical context) because:&lt;br&gt;  o Economically independent: p. 25&lt;br&gt;  o Interracial relations: pp. 26–27&lt;br&gt;• Prejudice as evidence: pp. 31–34</td>
<td>Case of Walter McMillian&lt;br&gt;Injustice in the legal system&lt;br&gt;Slavery&lt;br&gt;Racial Terror</td>
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<td><strong>2 “Stand”</strong>&lt;br&gt;Personalizes Stevenson’s experience and struggles with injustice.</td>
<td>• Personalizing the struggle aka “Getting close”— illustrates a different perspective from which Stevenson is personally connected to issues within the criminal justice system as he reacts to being wrongfully questioned/searched: pp. 39–46&lt;br&gt;• Prison conditions and abuse: pp. 36–38&lt;br&gt;• Illegal search/abuse of authority: pp. 41–42&lt;br&gt;• Judicial indifference to abuse of authority: pp. 43–44&lt;br&gt;• “Beating the drum for justice” aka continues to call for justice and brings attention to injustice: pp. 43–46</td>
<td>Racial profiling&lt;br&gt;Injustice in the legal system</td>
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<td><strong>3 “Trials and Tribulations”</strong>&lt;br&gt;Walter McMillian is arrested on false testimony.</td>
<td>• McMillian faces racism in law enforcement and the threat of lynching: p. 48&lt;br&gt;• Account of the faulty execution of John Evans: pp. 54–55&lt;br&gt;• Systematic exclusion of African-Americans from jury in McMillian case: pp. 59–64&lt;br&gt;• Torture: McMillan on death row prior to conviction: p. 53</td>
<td>Case of Walter McMillian&lt;br&gt;Injustice in the legal system</td>
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<td><strong>4 “The Old Rugged Cross”</strong>&lt;br&gt;A brief history of judicial overrides wherein judges can “override” the sentencing of juries and sentence convicted persons to death; the story of Herbert Richardson, a Vietnam War veteran with mental illness and other disabilities, executed by judicial decree.</td>
<td>• Alabama judge “overrides” life imprisonment sentence and Michael Lindsey is on death row (brief history of judge overrides): pp. 69–70&lt;br&gt;• The story of Richardson, war veteran with intellectual disabilities, to be executed in Alabama: pp. 72–78&lt;br&gt;• The last hours of Richardson’s life, including final goodbyes and preparation for execution: pp. 85–91</td>
<td>Injustice in the legal system&lt;br&gt;Inmates with intellectual disabilities</td>
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| 5 “Of the Coming of John” The story of Charlie, one of many children facing life in prison or worse in the penal system. | • Darnell Houston steps forward to offer testimony undercutting key witnesses in the McMillian conviction. Houston is harassed by law enforcement and threatened: pp. 105–108  
• Stevenson encouraged to visit the *To Kill a Mockingbird* museum in the Monroeville courthouse by staff while working on McMillian case: pg.108–109 | Case of Walter McMillian |
| 6 “Surely Doomed” | • “Alabama had more juveniles sentenced to death per capita than any other state or any other country in the world.” p. 115  
• Charlie, 14 yrs. old, faces life imprisonment for killing his mother’s boyfriend after months of domestic violence: pp. 117–120o Charlie is placed in an adult jail where he faces regular sexual assault. Stevenson eventually secures his release: pp. 124–126 | Juveniles in the justice system |
| 7 “Justice Denied” The story of Trina Garnet, a woman with intellectual disabilities, sentenced to life in prison at age 16. In jail she conceives a child after being raped by a guard. The child is placed in foster care. As of 2014, she remains in prison in Pennsylvania—a state with the largest population of child offenders condemned to die in prison in the world: pp. 148–151  
• Children in adult prison in solitary confinement: pp. 152–154  
• The rise in mandatory life sentences for children: p. 159  
• The story of Ian, a child placed in solitary confinement for 14.5 years: pp. 160–162 | Case of Walter McMillian  
Injustice in the legal system |
| 8 “All God’s Children” Further exploration into the mass incarceration of children with emphasis on mandatory life sentencing and solitary confinement. | • Despite insufficient evidence and legal deficiencies, McMillian’s appeal is denied: p. 127  
• Stevenson assembles evidence pointing overwhelmingly at McMillian’s innocence: pp. 131–132  
• Ralph Myers, the man pushed by Monroe County officials to offer false testimony leading to the McMillian conviction, confesses false testimony to Stevenson: pp. 134–136  
• The impact of class and race of the victim on sentencing: pp. 142–143  
• Stevenson and his partner invoke Rule 32 and gain access to Monroe County records as they attempt to bring McMillian’s case to a new trial: pp. 144–145 | Women in the justice system  
Juveniles in the justice system |
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<td>9 “I’m Here”</td>
<td>Recounts the three days of testimony in McMillian’s Rule 32 hearing.</td>
<td>Case of Walter McMillian</td>
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|                       | • Day One—Ralph Myers reverses his early testimony pointing to McMillian’s innocence in a Rule 32 hearing: pp. 165–171  
• Day Two—African-American courtroom attendees blocked from the courtroom reminiscent of the Civil Rights era: pp. 174–177 |                                                                            |
| 10 “Mitigation”       | A basic review of the mass incarceration of the mentally ill while highlighting that prisons have taken the place of treatment facilities in housing the mentally ill.                                                                 | Incarcerating the mentally ill              |
|                       | • Mass incarceration of the mentally ill: pp. 186–189  
• Stevenson recounts a story where a judge calls for the protection of the “rights of Confederate Americans”: p. 193  
• Stevenson defends Avery Jenkins, a profoundly mentally ill inmate and victim of abuse: pp. 197–200 |                                                                            |
| 11 “I’ll Fly Away”     | After being denied relief, Stevenson and McMillian move toward an appeal. With the help of the Alabama Bureau of Investigation, McMillian wins his freedom.                                                              | Case of Walter McMillian                     |
|                       | • McMillian denied relief after Rule 32 hearing: pp. 205–206  
• A discussion of the role of the media in the McMillian case: pp. 209–213  
• A ruling from the Alabama appellate court grants McMillian a new trial: pp. 219–220  
• McMillian is granted his freedom after the state joins Stevenson is arguing for his innocence: pp. 224–226 |                                                                            |
| 12 “Mother, Mother”   | The mass incarceration of poor women—especially women of color—often encouraged by hysterical fears of child abuse is explored through statistics and the story of Marsha Colbey.                                             | Women in the justice system                 |
|                       | • After giving birth to a stillborn child and burying that child in her yard, Marsha Colbey, poor and unable to pay for adequate defense, is wrongly convicted of murdering her infant child and sentenced to life in prison: pp. 228–235  
• Background and contemporary accounts of the mass incarceration of poor women: pp. 235–239 | Rights of the poor                          |
| 13 “Recovery”         | Details the months after McMillian’s release from prison. McMillian and Stevenson speak publicly against capital punishment.                                                                                          | Case of Walter McMillian                     |
|                       | • Media coverage of McMillian case in wake of release; increased media attention to capital punishment: pp. 242–243  
• Complications of McMillian’s return to his community after six years on death row: p. 244  
• State policies on financial compensation for wrongly incarcerated: p. 245  
• McMillian’s long-term psychological effects of time spent on death row: p. 244  
• DNA evidence exposing wrongful convictions: p. 249  
• Stevenson receives the Olof Palme International Human Rights Award: pp. 250–251 |                                                                            |
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| **14 “Cruel and Unusual”**  
Discusses the Equal Justice Initiative’s (EJI) challenge to prosecution & life imprisonment without parole of minors. Focuses on the case of Joe Sullivan, a 13 year-old with mental disabilities. | • The misidentification and racial profiling of a young African American male in a sexual assault case: p. 256  
• The prosecution of children in juvenile v. adult courts: p. 257  
• Inadequacy of appointed counsel/subsequent wrongful conviction: p. 258  
• The sentencing of Florida resident Joe Sullivan, a 13 year-old teen with mental disabilities, to a lifetime in prison: p. 259  
• Rape and sexual assault of minor in prison; health effects of trauma: p. 259  
• “Prison-industrial complex”—“Between 1990 & 2005, a new prison opened in the United States every ten days”: p. 260  
• EJI uses the 2005 Supreme Court decision that banned the death penalty for juveniles under Eighth Amendment to challenge juvenile life-without-parole sentences: pp. 264–266  
• EJI uses neurological, psychological, and sociological evidence to argue that sentencing children to life imprisonment without parole is cruel and unusual punishment: pp. 267–272 | Juveniles in the justice system  
Inmates with intellectual disabilities |
| **15 “Broken”**  
McMillian suffers with trauma-induced dementia, while EJI scrambles to keep up with increasing rate of executions in AL.  
Jimmy Dill, a death row inmate suffering from a severe intellectual disability, is executed despite Stevenson’s attempts to win relief. | • McMillian’s decline into trauma-induced dementia: p. 275–276  
• Increased rate of executions in Alabama despite slowing national trend/media influences: pp. 280–281  
• Stevenson argues in front of the Supreme Court, raising questions about legality of lethal injection: p. 281  
• The Supreme Court rules in *Baze v. Rees* that lethal execution protocols & drug combinations aren’t inherently unconstitutional, despite prisons’ questionable means of securing drugs to carry out lethal injections: p. 282  
• Alabama’s trial and execution of man with intellectual disability, despite the Supreme Court’s ban on executions of mentally disabled: pp. 283–288  
• Dill is executed and Stevenson nearly gives up: pp. 288–291  
• Stevenson remembers meeting Rosa Parks: pp. 291–293 | Case of Walter McMillian  
Capital Punishment  
Inmates with intellectual disability |
### Chapter Title & Focus

**16 “The Stonecatcher’s Song of Sorrow”**  
The EJI continues work on issues involving children, and Stevenson is encouraged by hopeful developments. Still, there is work to be done. He outlines four institutions that shape American racial consciousness.

Includes story of Joshua Carter and Robert Caston: “juvenile lifers who had been [in prison] for decades” (303). EJI wins release for both prisoners.

### Topics & Page Numbers

- **2010**—Supreme Court rules that “Life imprisonment without parole sentences imposed on children convicted of non-homicide crimes is cruel and unusual punishment and constitutionally impermissible”: p. 295
  - **2012**—EJI wins constitutional ban on mandatory life-without-parole sentences for children convicted of homicides: p. 295
  - EJI continues work on children’s issues: pp. 296–297
- EJI wins relief for 100 prisoners in Alabama; slows execution rate by litigating lethal injection protocols
  - **2013**—AL has “lowest number of new death sentences since…1970s”: p. 297
- Nationwide, rate of mass incarceration slows
  - **2012**—“U.S. saw first decline in its prison population in decades”: p. 298
- California bans mandatory sentencing “three strikes” law; nearly bans death penalty by popular vote: p. 298
- Angola, former slave plantation where inmates forced into manual labor: pp. 303–304
- EJI wins release of Joshua Carter, a 16 year-old African American: p. 304
  - New Orleans, 1963—beaten by police & coerced into confession to rape; given death penalty
  - 1965—Louisiana Supreme Court overturned conviction due to beating; Carter sentenced to life imprisonment at Angola
- EJI wins release of Robert Caston, inmate who spent 45 years at Angola for non-homicide crime at age 16: p. 304
  - Caston disabled as a result of work at Angola

### Themes

- Juveniles in the justice system
- Capital Punishment

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The Campus Read Committee at UW-Platteville hopes that you find this reading guide useful as you incorporate *Just Mercy* into your class. Please encourage your students to attend campus events during the semester. Visit the Campus Read website for details.

If you have questions about this resource or the Campus Read program, please contact Karen McLeer, Director of Retention Initiatives and Academic Success, at mcleerk@uwplatt.edu.

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1 This instructor resource was originally developed by the Academic Transition Programs office at Northern Arizona University and has been adapted with permission.