

ONE BOOK ONE MICHIANA

Discussion Questions for *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson

1. Think back to your opinions before you began to read Stevenson's book. What, if anything, in this book surprised you? How did this book challenge your beliefs on the following:
 - The criminal justice system
 - Capital punishment
 - Legal representation
 - Poverty
 - Race
 - Mental and intellectual disabilities
 - Women
 - Juvenile offenders
2. Stevenson notes in his book that "the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice." How did poverty play a pivotal role in the lives of the people in the book? Are poverty and justice able to exist together?
3. In terms of racial justice, how far do you think we have come since Mr. Stevenson first began his work as a lawyer? How can Stevenson's book be a tool for society in our current racially tense environment? What should we, as a society, learn from this piece?
4. As you read the book, what were your reactions to descriptions of the criminal justice system? Why does the author compare his own brokenness to the brokenness of the system? Do you believe that broken people can be healed? What does it mean to show mercy within a broken system?
5. Throughout the book we are presented with examples of courts refusing to review new evidence or to grant new trials in light of new information, defending their decision with "it's too late." Why wouldn't courts jump to analyze new information with the constitutional promise of "innocent until proven guilty"? What is holding them back and what can be done to reverse this hindering stance?
6. Stevenson takes a hard look at the issue of mental illness and criminal punishment in his book, having experienced various examples while at EJI. He states that "today, over 50% of prison and jail inmates in the United States have a diagnosed mental illness, a rate of nearly five times greater than that of the general adult population." Why do courts often ignore severe mental and intellectual disabilities at trial? Outside of the criminal justice system, do we as a society do any better? How can we combat this issue so that those that most need our help are not dismissed and buried in the prison system?
7. Monroeville is extremely proud of its hometown hero Harper Lee and her book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a Pulitzer Prize winning piece that sees white lawyer Atticus Finch defending African American man Tom Robinson against fabricated rape charges of a white girl in racially divided Maycomb, Alabama. What was your reaction to the fact that Walter McMillian's case took place in Monroeville? How could the very residents who romanticized Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* stand for (or, worse, contribute to) Walter's trials?
8. Walter McMillian was the 50th person exonerated from death row in the United States. Today, 146 people have been exonerated, many after serving decades in prison. What challenges do you think formerly incarcerated people, whether deemed innocent or not, face when they reenter their community? What support, if any, do you believe the government should grant former prisoners? Once proven innocent, do you believe an exonerated should receive compensation for their wrongful incarceration? Please explain your reasoning. Why are states, as Alabama was in McMillian's case, unwilling to accept responsibility for wrongful convictions?
9. Do you believe as Stevenson does, that we are more than the worst thing we have ever done? What effect, if any, should that belief have on the justice system?
10. Based on Stevenson's work, your interpretation and understanding of it, combined with your past experiences before reading this piece, what is your definition of "just mercy?"