

Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson
Discussion Questions*

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? Did we see any examples in the book? How should society work to right this grievous wrong?

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. At one point in the story, the aunt of murder victim Rena Mae Collins approaches Stevenson after Herbert Richardson's hearing and says, "[a]ll this grievin' is hard. We can't cheer for that man you trying to help but don't want to have to grieve for him, too. There shouldn't be no more killing behind this." What do you believe the role of the victim's family should be in the legal system? Should their wishes be taken into account at any point? Why or why not?

8. 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. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is likely the most famous 20th century novel dealing with racial injustice, a distrustful legal system, and the evils of stereotyping. What would you say to a community that simultaneously wrongfully convicts a man due in large part to their own prejudice, all the while celebrating Harper Lee's work? Is it ignorance? Naiveté? Indifference?

9. Stevenson writes, "[i]n debates about the death penalty, I had started arguing that we would never think it was humane to pay someone to rape people convicted of rape or assault and abuse someone guilty of assault or abuse. Yet we were comfortable killing people who kill, in part because we think we can do it in a manner that doesn't implicate our humanity, the way that raping or abusing someone would. I couldn't stop thinking that we don't spend much time contemplating the details of what killing someone actually involves." At another point in the book, Stevenson also states, "the real question of capital punishment in this country is 'do we deserve to kill'?" Regardless of your thoughts on the death penalty, do these quotes challenge your opinion? What are your thoughts regarding these two statements?

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?"