

A Review and Brief Analysis of Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* and the 2018 Young Adult Adaptation

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Bryan Stevenson's powerful memoir *Just Mercy* combines his acumen as a lawyer and expertise in the field of social justice, with a far more personal narrative style that resonates powerfully. This doesn't read as a diatribe, although there were times that *would* be justifiable. Instead, with little personal fanfare, Stevenson seeks to replay his own journey from young law intern to the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative early in his law career. Focused on representing inmates on death row who couldn't afford legal representation, *Just Mercy* explores issues of race and poverty in capital cases, particularly in the south in both Georgia and Alabama. As a young man, Stevenson came to represent Walter McMillian. McMillian was tried for the death of Ronda Morrison, an 18-year-old white girl, shot dead on the floor of Monroe Cleaners where she worked. Based on spurious evidence, a sheriff driven by racial prejudice, and with a judge motivated by reelection with a reputation for being "tough on crime," summarily convicted of capital murder, McMillian was sentenced to death. Despite numerous witnesses and other pieces of evidence that showed his innocence, the struggle to free McMillian took Stevenson years and became the defining case of his career.

Stevenson's skillful blending of historical and legal precedence are coupled with his own personal triumphs and frustrations. Early in the text, he painfully rehearses his first words to a death row inmate:

"Hello, my name is Bryan. I'm a student with the ..." "No." "I'm a student with ..." "No."
"My name is Bryan Stevenson ..." Soon I found myself pulling up to the intimidating
barbed-wire fence and white guard tower of the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification State
Prison. This was a hard place. (2014, p. 7)

He reveals an acute vulnerability. At other times, he writes with the power of an objective witness, recounting in plain terms, his observations. Whether guilty or innocent, Stevenson argues that the very existence of Death Row has been used to perpetuate racial stratification and endemic injustice, that white and wealthy defendants tried for similar crimes received very different sentences, particularly in Alabama and the south.

I first read *Just Mercy* in spring 2018, originally on my own and then later joining a book group led by Wichita State University Professor Dr. Robin Henry, held at St. James Episcopal church in Wichita. I found the group and subsequent discussions on race and social justice beneficial in my own understanding of the text, and I mention them here only in that I truly believe that dialogue was integral in processing the complexity of some of the social injustices catalogued.

The original text was released in 2014 and has subsequently received numerous awards and been the Common Read on college campuses across the country, including at Wichita State University in fall 2018. However, a new young adult adaptation was released in the fall 2018. A comparison of the two texts reveals that structurally, the two are nearly identical, with the same introduction and the same structural organization and chapter titles.

But an analysis shows that certain omissions and editorial changes were made. For example, chapter three begins identically in both texts, with the arrest of Walter McMillian, after public pressure and based on the sketchy testimony of witness Ralph Myers.

Adult Version (2014, p. 47)

They hadn't yet done much investigation into McMillian, so they decided to arrest him on a pretextual charge while they built their case. Myers claimed to be terrified of McMillian; one of the officers suggested to Myers that McMillian might have sexually assaulted him; the idea was so provocative and inflammatory that Myers immediately recognized its usefulness and somberly acknowledged that it was true. Alabama law had outlawed nonprocreative sex, so officials planned to arrest McMillian on sodomy charges.

Young Adult Version (2018, p. 46)

They hadn't yet investigated Mr. McMillian, so they decided to arrest him on a minor pretextual charge while they built their bigger case. During Myers's strange testimonial, the suggestion that Mr. McMillian might also have sexually assaulted him arose. Alabama law had outlawed nonprocreative sex, so officials planned to arrest Mr. McMillian on those charges.

In another example, when discussing the inconsistencies and illogical practices within the juvenile justice, Stevenson writes about the arguments made in litigation in trying to eliminate the death penalty as a juvenile sentence, from chapter 14 "Cruel and Unusual."

Adult Version (2014, p. 270)

We emphasized the incongruity of not allowing children to smoke, drink, vote, drive without restrictions, give blood, buy guns, and a range of other behaviors because of their well-recognized lack of maturity and judgment while simultaneously treating some of the most at-risk, neglected, and impaired children exactly the same as full-grown adults in the criminal justice system.

Young Adult Version (2018, p. 222)

We emphasized the hypocrisy of not allowing children to smoke, drink, vote, drive without restrictions, give blood, and buy guns because of their well-recognized lack of maturity and judgment while simultaneously treating some of the most at-risk, neglected, and impaired children exactly the same as full-grown adults in the criminal justice system.

The shifts between the texts are subtle. While certain facts and references have been deleted for brevity, overall the changes do not affect readability. The issues of race, poverty, incarceration, fair representation, wrongful prosecution, and the debilitating legacy that "tough on crime" policies have been vaguely concealed pillars of a systemically racist justice system remain intact.

Were I to choose between the two texts for secondary class use, I would first determine my own objectives. If I were going to spend a great deal of time on language analysis, I would stay with the original narrative, as the nuanced editorial decisions to affect the intensity of tone and the layered feelings that reveal Stevenson's own misgivings at times. But if my primary objective was to introduce these topics into my classroom in way that students could access and discuss, I would use the young adult adaptation.

Either way, I've come to the conclusion that I believe *Just Mercy* to be essential reading. If we are to maintain that literature can be both a window and a mirror (Sims Bishop, 1990), how important is it then to shed light on the systemic injustices that plague our country. Stevenson writes:

I felt the need to explain to people what Walter had taught me. Walter made me understand why we have to reform a system of criminal justice that continues to treat people better if

they are rich and guilty than if they are poor and innocent. A system that denies the poor the legal help they need, that makes wealth and status more important than culpability, must be changed. Walter's case taught me that fear and anger are a threat to justice; they can infect a community, a state, or a nation and make us blind, irrational, and dangerous. (p. 313)

References

- Sims Bishop, R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, (1)3: ix-xi. Retrieved from <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>
- Stevenson, B. (2014). *Just mercy*. Spiegel & Grau. New York.
- Stevenson, B. (2018). *Just mercy* (adapted for young adults). Penguin. New York.

Note: A discussion guide for *Just Mercy* has been created for teachers through the Equal Justice Initiative: <https://eji.org/just-mercy/discussion-guide>

Author Biography

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