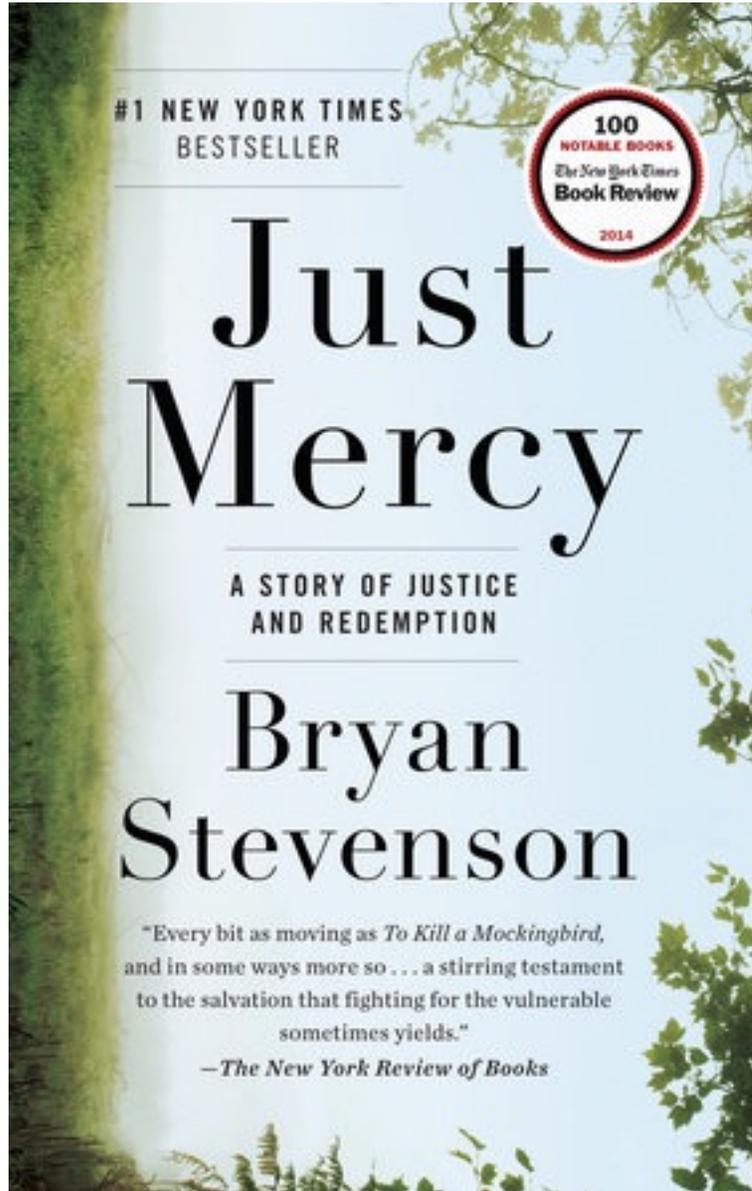


Georgia State University First-Year Book Program



2017-18 Teaching Guide



Introduction

Welcome to the Teaching Guide for *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson!

We hope that this guide will provide you with a starting point for utilizing the text in your first year courses. There are sample discussion questions, classroom activities, and essay suggestions to get you started.

I also encourage you to check out the “**Just Think**” research guide that was created by Dr. Katy Crowther and Pat Ziebert.

About the Author



Bryan A. Stevenson is a lawyer, social justice activist, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, and a clinical professor at New York University School of Law. Based in Montgomery, Alabama, Stevenson's work challenges the bias against minorities and the poor in the criminal justice system, especially children. He has challenged bias against the poor and minorities in the criminal justice system, especially children. His work has resulted in achieving court decisions that prohibit sentence children under the age of 18 to death and/or life imprisonment without parole.

Currently, Stevenson is working to establish The Memorial to Peace and Justice in Montgomery, which will document each of the nearly 4,000 lynchings of black people that took place in the twelve states of the South from 1877 to 1950. It is his belief that the history of lynchings has influenced the subsequent high rate of death sentences in the South, where it has been disproportionately applied to minorities. A related museum, From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, will offer interpretations to show the connection between the post-Civil War period of lynchings to the high rate of executions and incarceration of people of color in the United States.

Possible Discussion Questions

1. Does Stevenson's account of his work help you to see the connection between race and mass incarceration? If so, how does he build ethos? If not, what should he have done differently?
2. What rhetorical strategies does Stevenson use to engage readers?
3. do you believe you be an effective criminal lawyer without getting close?
4. What does Stevenson mean when he says "the opposite of poverty is justice?" Can you think of specific examples in the text that inform his position?
5. Reflect on the types of things kids do, and that you have done as a kid, that could lead to criminal charges. In your opinion, are there ever reasonable situations where minors should be charged as adults?
6. Do you find Walter's case to represent the best or the worst—or something else—of our justice system?
7. In what ways are female inmates more at risk than male inmates?
8. Should wrongfully imprisoned people receive financial restitution from the state? If so, how should the amount be determined?
9. What kind of emotions did the book bring up in you? Is this a book about combating racism? Why or why not?
10. Is this book an eye-opener for you; or validation of what you already knew? How does your race and/or social class factor into your reaction?

Classroom Activities

Activity #1: Agree or Disagree? Have students line up in a straight line side by side but facing you. You will ask them a set of questions about the criminal justice system and if they agree with the statement, they step forward. Students should not speak during this activity. Instead, just observe the differing opinions until it's time to debrief.

Here are a few statements to get you started but feel free to add more.

1. Everyone should have the right to vote.
2. I am willing to give up some of my constitutional rights in order to be safe.
3. The death penalty should be abolished.
4. Judges should be elected.
5. Drug testing should be allowed in public schools.
6. Private prisons are to blame for the school to prison pipeline.

Note: You can also do this activity in a debate style. Choose one of the statements and have students move to one side of the room based on if they agree or disagree. Instruct them to research and defend their position as a group. If you want to make it harder, force groups to defend the side

Classroom Activities (cont'd)

Activity #2: Based on the Supreme Court case of *McCleskey v. Kemp*, the class should break into teams. Each team should appoint two people to represent McCleskey, two people to represent Kemp, and one to act as a Supreme Court judge.

Both sides should present evidence on which only the judge should base a decision. Once each judge has made a ruling, the class should come together, and each judge will present the decision along with the influencing reasons.

Was there one prevailing decision? Did it seem like the judges were basing their decisions only on the facts presented directly to them, or were they also using their own emotions and previous thoughts on the matter?

Classroom Activities (cont'd)

Activity #3: Working in teams of four, take on the role of Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Corrections.

Imagine you have been asked to create a plan to make improvements at Tutwiler Prison. What would you prioritize? What new expectations would you put in place? Why would you make these choices?

Each team should present the plan to the class. Do you agree with your classmates' recommendations?

Essay Ideas

Personal Narrative

In the introduction, Stevenson discusses his family's background and what impact that had on his career choices. Write a story that centers on your family's history and the role it played on your current intended career path.

Exploratory/Investigative

Research incarceration rates for other wealthy nations; write an essay comparing and contrasting incarceration rates between these nations and the United States

Research mandatory minimum sentences in Georgia and at least two other states. Write an essay that compares and contrasts the differences in sentencing and why they may differ geographically.

Research and write a two-page paper on children and incarceration in your state. How are "minor" and "adult" defined? Are there extenuating circumstances to crimes that change these definitions? Cite actual cases from your state where these laws were tested

Analysis

Write a review of Just Mercy for The New York Times Book Review. What strengths and potential weaknesses did you find in this book? Would you recommend it to others? What suggestions would you make for inclusion/deletion in the second edition?

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