

NCTE Challenged Book Rationale

By Angela E. Schreiber

Title, Author, and Year

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, Bryan Stevenson, 2014

Target Grade Level and Audience

Given the frank nature in which crime and social injustices are discussed, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* is appropriate for grades 10–12. School audiences include students in English, civics, history, government, and advanced placement courses, as well as those studying social justice. Other audiences include those looking to learn more about the life of someone who lived through the author's experiences, who may have experienced or witnessed racism or social injustice, and who are interested in advocating for social justice.

Plot Summary; Genre(s); and Themes, Awards, Reviews

Summary: Bryan Stevenson's memoir, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, details the early years of his experiences at a nonprofit law office called the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). Dedicated to helping impoverished incarcerated individuals, the EJI's small staff fights high execution rates and the plight of the poor in the American justice system. Stevenson shares his experiences fighting for due process for people of color and/or from impoverished backgrounds and challenging the validity of legal processes that treated children as adults when convicted of crimes. While many incarcerated individuals are introduced throughout the text, much of the book focuses on Walter McMillian, who was sentenced to death for the murder of a white woman, despite being innocent of the crime. Stevenson asserts that McMillian's case "exemplifies how the death penalty in America is a direct descendent of lynching — a system that treats the rich and guilty better than the poor and innocent." The memoir shows how corrupt local officials may deny an individual due process and manipulate the legal system to achieve a desired outcome, regardless of guilt or innocence. The book includes depictions of prison life and discussions about the appropriateness of the death penalty and corruption within local police departments and the judicial system. Despite the complex and difficult topics Stevenson addresses, the memoir also contains hope, perseverance, and forgiveness, and highlights the idea of standing strong in the face of injustice.

Genre: Memoir

Themes: Resistance, Advocacy, Oppression, Justice, Systemic Power, Public Opinion, Racism, Poverty

Awards:

- [2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction](#)

- [Dayton Literary Peace Prize](#)
- [2015 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work in Nonfiction](#)
- [NAIBA Prize for Best Nonfiction of the Year](#)

Reviews:

- [New York Times Review of Just Mercy](#)
- [National Lawyers Guild Review of Just Mercy](#)
- [Washington Post Review of Just Mercy](#)
- [Common Sense Media Review: Just Mercy](#)

State Standards Connections

- Texas ELAR TEKS: 110.37.7 Multiple genres: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts and genres. The student recognizes and analyzes genre-specific characteristics, structures, and purposes within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse texts. The student is expected to:
 - (E) analyze characteristics and structural elements of argumentative texts such as:
 - i. clear arguable claim, appeals, and convincing conclusion;
 - ii. various types of evidence and treatment of counterarguments, including concessions and rebuttals; and
 - iii. identifiable audience or reader; and
- Texas Social Studies TEKS: 113.47.(2) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. The student is expected to:
 - (A) locate, analyze, organize, synthesize, evaluate, and apply information about the selected topic, identifying, describing, and evaluating multiple points of view;
 - (B) differentiate between valid primary and secondary sources and use them appropriately to conduct research and construct arguments;
 - (C) read narrative texts critically and identify points of view from the historical context surrounding an event and the frame of reference that influenced the participants;
 - (D) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions;

Suggested Teaching Approaches

The following websites provide text-specific lesson plans and resources for teaching with *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*:

- [Equal Justice Initiative - Just Mercy Teaching Guide](#)

- [Gavilan College: *Just Mercy* Lesson Plans](#)
- [Teach With Movies: *Just Mercy*](#)

The following list includes instructional strategies for teaching texts that involve complex issues:

- Use as a text for a book club studying [books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors](#).
- Use as a text for developing [understanding of power, agency, and voice](#).
- Use as a text for evaluating multiple perspectives via [Socratic Seminars](#).
- Use a tool mentor text for developing [reflective writing](#) and [understanding identity](#).
- Use a text for facilitating [respectful, inclusive, and constructive dialogue](#) about sensitive topics.
- Use as a paired text with [To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee](#).

Alternative Texts:

- *Just Mercy (Movie Tie-In Edition, Adapted for Young Adults): A True Story for the Fight for Justice* by Bryan Stevenson is a youth adaptation of the full memoir of the same name and addresses the need to protect the human rights of the poor, the wrongly convicted, and marginalized populations. [Link to publisher](#)
- *Just Pursuit: A Black Prosecutor's Fight for Fairness* by Laura Coates addresses similar issues from the perspective of a prosecutor. [Link to the publisher](#)
- *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers is a fictionalized, multi-genre journal of a young aspiring filmmaker grappling with his identity and the justice system as he faces trial for a crime he may or may not have committed. [Link to publisher](#)
- *No Choirboy: Murder, Violence, and Teenagers on Death Row* by Susan Kuklin is a nonfiction book that explores the lives and experiences of teenagers on death row, shedding light on issues of race, poverty, and the criminal justice system. [Link to publisher](#)
- *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam is a novel-in-verse that follows the journey of a talented artist who is wrongfully convicted of a crime and explores themes of race, art, and the power of self-expression. [Link to publisher](#)
- *Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Sonja Cherry-Paul (Adapted by), Jason Reynolds, and Ibram X. Kenidi provides a history of racism in the United States and explains how racism influences modern America. [Link to publisher](#)
- *The Sun Does Shine* by Anthony Ray Hinton, tells the story of a wrongfully convicted man who spent 30 years on death row for a crime he didn't commit. [Link to publisher](#)

Potential for Challenge

Stevenson's memoir is a frank description of the experiences he, his clients, and his colleagues faced throughout Stevenson's career. The book includes discussions of murder, rape, and other violent crimes,

police brutality, frequent use of the N-word, and several instances of verbal and physical aggression and racism.

- Racial injustice: The memoir depicts how systemic racial bias influences the American justice system. Resource: [The Conscious Kid](#) provides guides and resources for how to talk about race, racism, and justice.
- Systemic power: The memoir addresses how the American legal system contributes to the oppression of marginalized groups, such as the poor, disabled, and African Americans. Resource: The [Zinn Education Project](#) provides articles, lesson plans, professional development, and resources for addressing current and historical events and social issues involving power and social change.
- Advocacy: The memoir encourages advocacy efforts for marginalized groups, such as the poor, disabled, and African Americans. Resource: The [Center for Media Literacy](#) provides resources and lesson plans for teaching responsible media consumption and response to media. The [Global Oneness Project](#) supplies a collection of resources for developing advocacy skills.
- Sensitivity to trauma: The book explores themes of racial inequality, wrongful convictions, and harsh prison conditions, which may be distressing for some students. It's essential to create a safe and supportive environment for discussions. Resource: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) supplies guidelines and resources for addressing trauma in educational settings. The [NCTSN website](#) offers valuable information and strategies to support students who may be affected.
- Emotional engagement: The book contains stories of injustice and suffering that can evoke strong emotions in students. Managing and processing these emotions is crucial to support a constructive learning environment. Resource: The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence has developed the RULER approach, which helps educators and students recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions. [The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence website](#) also provides research-based tools and techniques for emotional intelligence development.
- Addressing bias and privilege: *Just Mercy* exposes the deep-rooted biases and systemic issues in the criminal justice system. Students may need guidance to examine their own biases and understand the concept of privilege. Resource: [The Anti-Defamation League's \(ADL\) website](#) offers educational resources, including lesson plans and activities, to promote understanding and combat bias, discrimination, and social injustice.
- Complex legal concepts: The book discusses legal terms and processes that may be unfamiliar to students. Simplifying and contextualizing these concepts is crucial for comprehension. Resource: [The American Bar Association \(ABA\)](#) has an extensive collection of educational resources on its website, including lesson plans and guides to help educators teach legal concepts in an accessible manner.

Ways in which this book is valuable for the curriculum and/or for a classroom library

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption by Bryan Stevenson addresses how the American legal system contributes to the oppression of marginalized groups, such as the poor, disabled, and African Americans. By reading this text, students gain a unique opportunity to engage with objective facts and poignant personal narratives, allowing them to critically evaluate their own beliefs about the state of justice in our society. Through Stevenson's compelling storytelling and rigorous analysis, students can develop a deep understanding of the systemic issues at play, while also recognizing the impact of hope, perseverance, forgiveness, and standing strong in the face of injustice. By using *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* as an educational tool, teachers become catalysts for fostering empathy and critical thinking.

Additional References

- The resources found on the [Berkley Law Just Mercy Supplemental Materials and Reading List](#) include additional materials and a curated list of readings related to the book, which can be used to enhance the understanding and discussion of its themes and legal concepts.
- The website [Equal Justice Initiative Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#) is the official website of the Equal Justice Initiative's "Just Mercy" campaign, providing information, resources, and opportunities for engagement related to the book *Just Mercy* and the organization's work in advocating for criminal justice reform and ending mass incarceration.
- Resources on the [Facing History & Ourselves](#) site include curriculum and professional development for educators to explore historical events and their impact on society, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and responsible decision-making among students.
- The article [Weaving SEL Skills into Book Talks](#) provides a suggestions for combining social-emotional learning (SEL) skills with book discussions, allowing educators or facilitators to guide conversations about a book's themes, characters, and conflicts while addressing emotional intelligence, empathy, and communication skills.