



Go Big Read

UW–Madison Common Book Program

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

1. *Just Mercy* begins with information about Bryan Stevenson growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. He remembers his grandmother telling him, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close” (14). How does Stevenson get close to the incarcerated people he is helping? How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect Stevenson’s life? Can you be an effective criminal lawyer without getting close?
2. Early in the book, Stevenson describes an incident when he was racially profiled and the police searched his car. He wonders, if there had been drugs in his car and he was arrested, would he have been able to convince his attorney that his car was searched illegally? Stevenson says, “Would a judge believe that I’d done nothing wrong? Would they believe someone who was just like me but happened not to be a lawyer? Someone like me who was unemployed and had a criminal record?” (44). How does Stevenson’s work shape his understanding of the justice system? Do his experiences make him more or less empathetic to those in the justice system? Is it surprising that someone whose 86-year-old grandfather was murdered would work so tirelessly against the death penalty?
3. As a result of his extensive work with low income and incarcerated people, Stevenson concludes that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice” (18). What does this statement mean? What examples in the book inform Stevenson’s position on poverty and justice? What is justice? What does ‘Just Mercy’ mean?
4. Stevenson describes numerous workarounds within the United States legal system. We learn that nearly every prisoner on death row had been tried by an all-white or nearly all-white jury, despite a Supreme Court ruling in the 19th century that declared excluding black people from jury duty unconstitutional. Why do you think black people are excluded from the juries of black defendants? What factors should influence jury selection?
5. Stevenson was interviewed by Terry Gross on the National Public Radio show *Fresh Air*. When asked about the McMillian case, he says, “...it was challenging because even when we presented all of that evidence— and we presented Mr. McMillian’s strong alibi, the first couple of judges said, ‘No, we’re not going to grant relief.’ It took us six years to get a court to ultimately overturn the conviction. And I think it speaks to this resistance we have in this country to confronting our errors, to confronting our mistakes.” Is there a lack of humility in our justice system? In America? Why does it take so much time, effort and perseverance to get the legal system to confront its mistakes? How could this be changed?

6. Stevenson provides examples of defendants whose mental illness is never mentioned at trial. Why do you think mental illness often goes unaddressed at trial? Should it be considered? If so, what are fair ways to try/treat individuals with mental health issues? What is our responsibility to people with mental health issues when these individuals become involved in the justice system?
7. Many United States citizens will find this book painful to read, demoralizing and even shameful. What kind(s) of emotional state(s) did the book bring up in you? Is this a book about combating racism? What is this book about?
8. Readers from varied backgrounds will approach this book with different knowledge and experiences. Did Stevenson's examples resonate with you, or were you shocked? Is the book an eye-opener for you, or validation of what you already knew? Consider how your reaction would differ if you were of a different race or class; were the victim of a serious crime; or had personal experience with the justice system.
9. Take a look at the map below (fig. 1) from Prison Policy Initiative, a non-partisan organization. Is there anything that surprises you about particular states? What do you notice when you focus on particular regions of the country? We know the death penalty continues to be an issue without consensus. How does the map reflect that?

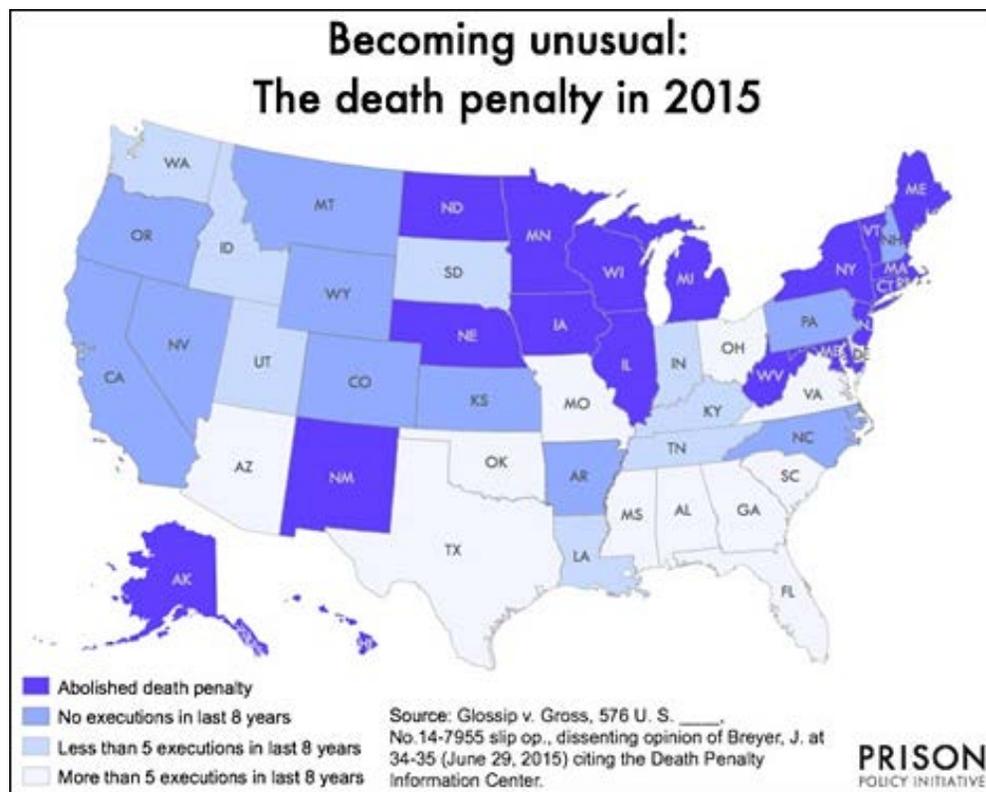


Fig. 1. Executions by state in 2015. Map from "Justice Breyer Argues the Death Penalty Isn't Just Cruel, It's Unusual Too," by Rachel Gandy (*Prison Policy Initiative*; Blog, 2 July 2015; Web; 15 July 2015).

10. Stevenson's book may be seen by some as narrowly focused on injustice in the south, yet readers in Wisconsin might consider the book differently in light of some statistics on our prison population. In 2012 for example, the black population in Wisconsin was 6.5%, but black people accounted for over 40% of our state's prison population. In 2012 71% of female inmates had a mental health condition (Wisconsin Department of Corrections). How do the issues in *Just Mercy* relate to Wisconsin's justice system? To the United States in general?
11. The United States' use of the death penalty differs from other countries' use. For instance, Germany abolished the death penalty after the Holocaust. In India, where the death penalty is legal, only a handful of criminals have been executed since the turn of the century. What do you know about other countries and their position on and enforcement of capital punishment? How might politics, religion, culture and/or history play a role?
12. In *The New York Times*, Ted Conover says Stevenson: "has the defense lawyer's reflex of refusing to acknowledge his clients' darker motives. A teenager convicted of a double murder by arson is relieved of agency; a man who placed a bomb on his estranged girlfriend's porch, inadvertently killing her niece, 'had a big heart.'" Stevenson believes the bomb builder never intended for the bomb to explode. Does it matter whether Stevenson's clients are truthful? Should their honesty affect how well he defends them? Why?
13. What did this book teach you about the legal process in the United States that you did not know already? What questions do you still have, and how might you find the answers? What resources are available for people in Madison who need help navigating the legal system?
14. *The New York Times* says *Just Mercy* "reads like a call to action." Stevenson calls for increasing the salaries of teachers, law enforcement, and social workers in an interview with National Public Radio. Are you compelled to take action after reading the book? If so, what would that action look like? Are there local or national groups that you would work with to make your action more powerful? (For more information on local and national groups, please see the "Call to Action" section of the UW-Madison Libraries' *Just Mercy: Go Big Read Research Guide* (<http://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/justmercy>.)

Works Cited:

Conover, Ted. "'Just Mercy', by Bryan Stevenson." *New York Times*. New York Times, 17 Oct. 2014. Web. 15 July 2015.

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Questions courtesy of Madison Public Library, University of Wisconsin – Madison and Penguin Random House

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