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# JUST MERCY



## *A Student Learning Guide*



**JOURNEYS IN FILM**  
educating for global understanding

## Introducing *Just Mercy*



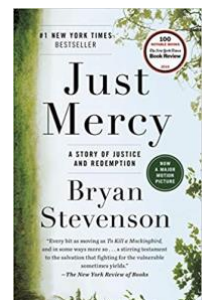
After watching *Just Mercy*, you may feel as if this story depicts an unfortunate moment long ago. Bryan Stevenson's battle against an Alabama justice system haunted by the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow laws, took place in the late 1980s. But the oppression, discrimination, and dehumanization it shows still plague our present-day society.

The story follows young Harvard Law School graduate Bryan Stevenson's move to Alabama because he sees an urgent need to provide free legal assistance to people who have been unfairly sentenced. There he meets Walter McMillian, a Black man wrongfully sentenced to death, and works for his release. As you come to know Walter, you will learn more about incarcerated individuals and the reasons Bryan persisted in the face of devastating barriers.

At first, Walter is an independent business owner who takes in a moment of fresh air working outdoors as a logger, but then a brutal encounter with the police results in his arrest, conviction, and death sentence for murder. On death row, he tries to be a source of hope for his friends although he is not hopeful that he himself will be set free.

As you watch the film, you will learn more about these real, three-dimensional human beings with histories and aspirations. You will learn about the hopes, fears, and frustrations of Walter's family vividly and the staff of the Equal Justice Initiative as they staff cope with racism, bureaucracy, and politics. Today, when the police, the courts, and the prison system are under close scrutiny, this film tells the story from the perspective of one innocent man, a man who stands for many others, and of the young attorney and staff who successfully challenge the system.

Want to learn more after seeing the film? Read Bryan Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*.



## The Background of *Just Mercy*



The harshness of life in Walter McMillian's Alabama is the result of well over a century of tactics used by Southern whites to solidify power over Black residents after Reconstruction ended in 1877. Black people lost the right to vote that had been guaranteed by the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Poll taxes, unfair literacy tests, white supremacist officials, and the threat of violence all combined to make voting almost impossible for them. The sharecropping system kept Black farmers poor since they didn't own the land they worked on. Public education was segregated and schools for Black children were poor compared to those of whites. Laws enforced "separate but equal" accommodations for transportation, restaurants, bathrooms, and even water fountains. Violence, including lynchings and cross-burnings, was used to intimidate anyone who dared challenge the rules of segregation. By the 1920s, white supremacist attitudes led to a revival of the Ku Klux Klan, first in Indiana and then throughout the South. By 1930, historians estimate that between three and eight million people were members of the Klan.

After years of marches and sit-ins during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Congress under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned the use of literacy tests and provided for federal oversight of voter registration in where people of color were prevented from voting. Later acts banned other methods of limiting the Black vote.

In spite of these laws, discrimination and prejudice still existed by the time Bryan Stevenson arrived in Alabama.

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In the next pages, you will find directions for assignments to complete as you view and think about the film *Just Mercy*. Follow your teacher's directions about how and when assignments are to be completed.



## Assignment 1: Setting the Scene



On July 9, 2020, National Public Radio's *Throughline* produced a 43-minute podcast called "The Long Hot Summer," about urban unrest and even riots in the cities during the 1960s, the ways police and the federal government responded, and the results of an investigation by the Kerner Commission, a group appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Listen to the podcast at <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/07/888184490/the-long-hot-summer> or read the transcript at <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/888184490>. (You may do both simultaneously if you prefer.) Then answer the following questions.

1. What were the hardships African Americans faced following the Civil Rights Movement? How were these hardships similar to those following Reconstruction?
2. How did violence permeate both the period following Reconstruction and the end of the Civil Rights Movement?
3. What connections can you make between the period following Reconstruction, the end of the Civil Rights Movement, and the modern emergence of Black Lives Matter?



## Assignment 2: Important Terms to Know



To do this assignment, talk to several people who are well-informed and whose opinions you respect. Discuss with them what they think each of the following terms means. Consider what they have said and then write your own definition. These terms will be helpful to you in watching the film and writing and talking about it afterwards.

Prejudice

Discrimination

Stereotype

Bias

Implicit Bias

Assumption

Resilience

Racism

## Assignment 3: Bryan Stevenson and Walter McMillian



During the first half-hour of the film, the viewer becomes acquainted with Bryan Stevenson as he moves to practice law in Alabama and learns about the swift conviction of Walter McMillian. Stop viewing after the scene in which Bryan visits Walter in prison for their first conversation together and the following scene showing Walter being walked by a prison guard back to his cell. (23:10)

1. What were your thoughts as you watched the initial encounter of the police officer and Walter McMillian? Were you surprised at any point in this scene?
2. What are some ways in which Bryan builds trust and a close connection with those he is helping? Do you think it is important for the film to show these encounters? Why, or why not?
3. What are your initial thoughts after watching the first meeting between Bryan and Walter?





## Assignment 4: The Case Continues



Continue viewing up to and including the judge's initial decision on whether to grant Walter a new trial (1:41:46). Then answer the following questions.

1. Describe some encounters that Bryan personally witnesses or experiences that indicate how pervasive racism is in that community and the danger that he puts himself in by taking actions against injustice? How does he feel in these situations? How does he respond?
2. What does Bryan learn about Walter's background and his community of supporters?
3. How did you react after hearing the judge's decision on whether to grant Walter a new trial after the testimony of Ralph Myers? Why did you react that way?



## Assignment 5: The Continued Search for Justice



View the rest of the movie and consider the following points.

1. How do poverty, power, and fear affect Walter's case in the movie?
2. How is intimidation used in Walter's case and throughout the film?
3. Throughout the movie, there are elements of hope and resilience such as the large group of family and community members that show up in Walter's home to meet Bryan. What are some other ways that the movie shows moments of hope and resilience?





## Assignment 6: Thinking Back



Describe three scenes from the movie that were particularly powerful or meaningful for you. Why did they stand out for you?

Scene 1:

Scene 2:

Scene 3:

## Assignment 7: Could It Happen Again?

### A Research Assignment



In 2018 the National Registry of Exonerations published a study showing that over the previous twenty years, 2,265 exonerees (people who were wrongly convicted and then shown to be innocent) served a total of 20,080 years behind bars.<sup>1</sup> The Equal Justice Initiative is one organization that has helped bring about these exonerations, in addition to representing those who are unfairly sentenced, excessively punished, and subjected to inhumane conditions of confinement. Another organization is the Innocence Project. Do some research on one of these organizations to answer these questions:

1. What did you learn about the organization? For example, its history, its purposes, its leadership.
2. Choose one case that was handled by this organization. Write a summary of what happened, including:
  - a. What was the crime the person had allegedly committed?
  - b. Why was he or she convicted?
  - c. What was wrong about the individual's trial and conviction?
  - d. How long did the person serve time in prison?
  - e. How was he or she eventually exonerated?
3. Give an oral report to your classmates if possible. Try to figure out what many of these cases have in common.

Internet resources to help you:

Equal Justice Initiative <https://eji.org/>

The Innocence Project <https://www.innocenceproject.org/>

## Assignment 8: Conclusion



Your teacher will tell you which question(s) to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2018/09/10/report-wrongful-convictions-have-stolen-at-least-20000-years-from-innocent-defendants/>

1. What do you think the main actors thought of their roles? Do you think making the movie was important to them? Do you think they enjoyed making the film?
2. Did you find yourself more interested in one character than in the others? Why?
3. Do you think that Bryan's growing connection with Walter and others helps him personally develop a deeper understanding of the issues of injustice, racism, mass incarceration, and punishment? Why or why not? To what extent did Bryan's story help you understand these issues?
4. The Monroe, Alabama, community felt the initial conviction of Walter McMillian was an act of justice. How do you think Bryan's understanding of justice compares with that of the other characters involved in the court system for Walter's case? Has the film influenced your own definition of justice? If so, how?
5. What moment in the movie strikes you as having the greatest impact? Why?
6. Choose one of the following quotations and interpret its meaning to the character who spoke it. What are your own thoughts on this quote?
  - "You're guilty from the moment you're born." (Walter McMillian/Johnny D)
  - "My job is not to make people happy. It's to achieve justice for my client." (Bryan Stevenson)
  - "The opposite of poverty isn't wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice." (Bryan Stevenson)
  - "I was in before you even offered me the job." (Eva Ansley)
  - "If you can't see the danger in what you're doing, you need to ask Harvard for your money back." (Alice Stevenson, Bryan's mother)
  - "But if they take me out to the chair tonight, I'm going out smiling, because I got my truth back." (Walter McMillian/Johnny D)





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