

Just mercy by bryan stevenson: mercy is the best way to treat people

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A Problem with the American Justice System

Just Mercy is Bryan Stevenson's personal record of his career as, essentially, a guardian (more specifically, a legal aid) to those discriminated against by the law. Off the bat, readers are informed about his history briefly, and we learn his motives behind going into this area of study. I found it oddly endearing that his grandmother was one of the main reasons he found his interest – she constantly educated him on the struggle for equality, as we learn she was the daughter of slaves in Virginia. Right away, I knew this book was going to be extremely swaying, as Stevenson has such a personal account in the matter. The fact that he cared so deeply for his grandmother obviously played a huge part in his empathy for the victims of unfair incarceration, and victims of discrimination overall.

The main point Stevenson communicates throughout the book is the fact that there is a problem with the American justice system. He believed it vilified certain marginalized groups, i. e. African Americans, while barely punishing others, i. e. White people. From the stories he describes, it's hard

not to feel the same way. Although this is a memoir of many pain-filled stories, I found relief in the fact that they do stem from a greater good. Stevenson was able to meet all these people through the foundation of the Equal Justice Initiative he started with his friend Eva Ansley in Alabama. The program was what allowed Stevenson to speak up for all these men and women victimized by the justice system.

McMillian's Story

There is an assortment of “victims” he uses as examples throughout the book, all being falsely sentenced of their crimes or just harshly punished. One person's story, however, is the central story told of the book, taking about half of the book just to tell. Walter McMillian was a Black man accused of murdering a White woman, Vickie Pittman. We learn that Walter is a somewhat “American Dream” story – he was born into a poor family but eventually became very successful as an adult. I think this is part of what makes McMillian's story so compelling to me; he had overcome all the adversity faced to him as a child growing up in these conditions, and he still got unfairly treated in the end by the legal system.

Myer's Story

Ralph Myer's story was completely contradictory to McMillian's – in fact, he's the man who made the false accusation sending McMillian to death row. I found his story very tough to understand emotionally because part of me despised him for almost ending another man's life so easily. However, as I read on further I started to have more and more empathy for him. After learning how much environmental interactions can influence adult behaviors,

I couldn't help but almost sympathize with Myer. He was born to a poor socioeconomic family, and he suffers from psychological problems stemming from past trauma. He's initially also convicted for the murder of Miss Pittman, and that's when he falsely accuses McMillian of it.

I start to feel empathy for him once I realized how much he tries to take back his statement. I have always been a firm believer in allowing people the grace to make up for their mistakes, no matter how bad they may seem. I became so frustrated reading how difficult the justice department made it for Myers to, essentially, do the right thing! To me, this is where the evidence of this racial disparity in the system really came to light. It seemed that the law would rather have a Black, easily victimized man go to jail for a crime he didn't commit, than spend the resources and time to find the true offender.

Eventually, Myers is assisted by Stevenson's foundation, EJI, and is able to retract his statement, exonerating McMillian from his death row sentencing (which seemed to go on forever, at least how Stevenson described). I was honestly terrified to read the end of this first section, I didn't think I could handle the story ending in McMillian's unfair death. As corny as it may be, I felt myself release an actual breath of relief finding out he was acquitted from his death row sentencing, as I'm sure many other readers did too.

The Ending

While there was a lot more information Stevenson covered in this book, I found the personal victim accounts the most gripping, and the most intriguing. Apart from the actual victim accounts, though, he explores a lot

surrounding the underlying racial inequalities still present in modern-day America and our justice system. I found the ending quite beautiful; Stevenson's description of McMillian's eventual death and funeral. This is where I really understood how much McMillian impacted Stevenson's entire worldview. Stevenson basically concludes the book with a simple statement about how there is always room for positive transformation, and immediate punishment is not always the way. Mercy, just mercy can be the best way to treat even the evilest seeming people.