

MERCY AS METHOD: ON BRYAN STEVENSON'S JUST MERCY*by*

Aashita Sabikhi

Faculty Of Law,

Maharaja Sayajirao University

One of the interesting risks of reading a book such as *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* is that you're not only reading a book about the book, you're reading a book about the bookwriter. The risk is that it may not disappoint, but that a reviewer, humored by the topic, will lapse into eulogy and never read the book as a book: as an argument, structure, a series of literary and rhetorical choices that do particular work. The temptation to eulogize its substance over its art would be a disservice to Bryan Stevenson's memoir, which is all three of these things. What follows is a vain attempt to follow both seriously.

The stakes of reading *Just Mercy* well are heightened by how far the book has travelled beyond the readers of legal memoirs. First published in 2014, it became a sustained bestseller and was adapted into a feature film released in 2019, carrying Stevenson's account of the McMillian case to audiences who would never otherwise encounter a work of legal non-fiction.¹

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The Architecture of an Argument

Just Mercy makes a structural choice that warrants careful consideration: Stevenson alternates between the story of Walter McMillian (a black man sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit and later exonerated in Monroeville, Alabama) and a string of short chapters, seemingly independent, about other clients: a woman convicted of capital murder after giving birth to a stillborn baby, women prosecuted for stillbirths, the mentally ill on death row, the disabled awaiting execution. At a first glance, this may seem like padding, a method of making one story into a book-sized tale. It is not. The argument is the braiding.

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Bryan Stevenson' (Britannica) <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bryan-Stevenson>> accessed 18 July 2026; 'Just Mercy and the Heartbreaking True Story of Walter McMillian' (E! News, 13 January 2020) <<https://www.eonline.com/news/1110139/just-mercy-and-the-heartbreaking-true-story-of-walter-mcmillian>> accessed 18 July 2026.

By refusing to let McMillian's case stand alone, Stevenson resists the most comfortable misreading available to his audience: that wrongful conviction is an aberration, a tragic malfunction in an otherwise sound machine. The interspersed cases insist instead that McMillian's ordeal is not an exception the system produced but a pattern the system requires. Poverty, race, geography, and the absence of adequate counsel do not occasionally corrupt the administration of justice; in the accumulated weight of Stevenson's case files, they appear to constitute it. This is a bolder and more uncomfortable claim than the book's warm, almost gentle prose style might initially suggest, and it is worth naming plainly: *Just Mercy* is not a story about a broken system fixing itself through the heroism of one lawyer. It is a story about a system that is, in its ordinary operation, doing more or less what it was built to do and about what it costs one man to keep insisting otherwise.

This claim is not merely rhetorical. National data on wrongful convictions lend empirical weight to Stevenson's insistence that error of this kind is systemic rather than exceptional: eyewitness misidentification has been implicated in roughly seventy percent of convictions later overturned by DNA evidence, making it the single largest documented contributing cause of wrongful convictions in the United States. Read against this backdrop, a conviction secured on the word of one coerced witness looks less like an isolated failure of one small-town investigation and more like an instance of a well-documented national pattern.²

McMillian, and the Machinery Behind Him

The McMillian narrative itself deserves to be read slowly, because its horror lies less in any single dramatic injustice than in the sheer administrative ordinariness of how each injustice was produced. A man with no criminal history and a solid alibi, corroborated by numerous witnesses attending a church fish fry, is nonetheless convicted on the word of a witness who later admits, on the record, to having been coerced and coached. He is placed on death row before trial even begins a detail Stevenson lets sit without much editorializing, because it does not need any. The presiding judge overrides a jury's recommendation of life imprisonment to impose death instead, a maneuver Alabama law permitted at the time and used almost

² 'How Eyewitness Misidentification Can Send Innocent People to Prison' (Innocence Project, 23 April 2023) <<https://innocenceproject.org/news/how-eyewitness-misidentification-can-send-innocent-people-to-prison/>> accessed 18 July 2026.

exclusively to lengthen, rather than shorten, sentences. This practice was not a marginal feature of Alabama's capital sentencing system. For decades, judges in the state overrode jury verdicts of life to impose death far more often than judges in any other state that permitted the procedure, a pattern that persisted until the legislature finally eliminated it.³

What makes this section of the book more than a recitation of injustice is Stevenson's insistence on institutional texture: the specific phone call from a judge warning him off the case, the specific complicity of a sheriff's department invested in a quick resolution, the specific economics of an indigent defense system so underfunded that adequate representation was structurally, not just occasionally, unavailable. The scale of the underfunding was considerable. For years, Alabama compensated capital defence attorneys at rates as low as forty dollars an hour for time spent in court and twenty dollars an hour for preparation outside it, with total compensation for out-of-court work capped at one thousand dollars regardless of a case's complexity.⁴ Stevenson is a lawyer before he is a memoirist, and it shows in the best possible way he understands that outrage untethered from mechanism is merely sentiment, while outrage grounded in the specific gears and levers of a bureaucracy becomes something closer to an indictment that can be acted upon.

Stevenson is subtle rather than pedantic in his selection of Monroeville as the setting for this story, which is where the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* grew up. He need not remind readers of the resemblance to *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the pair of an innocent black man framed for murder and a good white lawyer who takes him up on his defense are self-explanatory. Instead, Stevenson throws the reader a reminder that Monroeville has become an attraction for tourists, and he is merely the same substance in a different place: a few blocks away in a courtroom. The irony Stevenson gestures toward is borne out by the town's own civic life. Monroeville markets itself as the Literary Capital of Alabama and draws visitors from around the world to the restored county courthouse, where fans of Harper Lee's novel can stand in the balcony from which the fictional Scout once watched her father defend an innocent man. That the same courthouse square sits only a short distance from where McMillian was tried in reality gives

³ Equal Justice Initiative, 'Alabama's Death Penalty' (EJI) <<https://eji.org/issues/alabama-death-penalty/>> accessed 18 July 2026.

⁴ Equal Justice Initiative (n 5).

the juxtaposition its quiet force: fiction is preserved as heritage while its real counterpart goes largely unmarked.⁵ It's one of the silent and most heart-wrenching collages in the book.

The Ethics of Proximity

If the book has a philosophical center of gravity, it is Stevenson's recurring claim that justice requires proximity that one cannot adequately understand, let alone repair, systems of harm from a comfortable distance. This is not an abstract or merely rhetorical commitment in the book; it is enacted structurally, in the decision to narrate the mechanics of death row not through statistics but through the daily, humiliating, and often absurd particulars of specific human beings: a man who requests a slice of his execution-day cake be saved for later, a client whose dementia makes him ask, repeatedly, when his lawyer is coming, unaware that Stevenson is already in the room.

The particularity Stevenson insists upon recurs across his client list rather than resting on McMillian alone. Anthony Ray Hinton, another Alabama man represented by Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, spent close to three decades on death row, much of it in near-total isolation, before advances in forensic testing led to his exoneration. Such biographical density, repeated across several cases rather than concentrated in one, is part of what allows the book's proximity thesis to accumulate force instead of resting on a single, potentially anomalous, example.⁶

This emphasis on proximity does real philosophical work that is easy to underrate. Much of contemporary debate about criminal justice in law reviews, in legislative hearings, in cable news panels proceeds by way of abstraction: recidivism rates, deterrence models, cost-benefit analyses of incarceration. Stevenson's implicit argument is that this abstraction is not merely incomplete but actively distorting, that a system evaluated only through aggregate data will reliably fail to notice the specific cruelties it produces. Proximity, in his account, is not sentimentality dressed up as method; it is an epistemological claim about what counts as adequate evidence when evaluating a system's moral character.

⁵ 'Alabama Small-Town Wonders: Monroe County Museum' (Alabama News Center, 24 March 2023) <<https://alabamaneWSCenter.com/2023/03/24/alabama-small-town-wonders-monroe-county-museum/>> accessed 18 July 2026.

⁶ Equal Justice Initiative, 'Just Mercy' (EJI) <<https://justmercy.eji.org/>> accessed 18 July 2026.

Mercy, Redefined

The book's title promises "just mercy," and it is worth pausing on how carefully Stevenson redefines that phrase over the course of the narrative. In casual usage, mercy is often treated as justice's soft opposite—the thing you extend when strict justice would be too harsh, a discretionary kindness layered atop an otherwise rigorous system. Stevenson inverts this. In his account, mercy is not an exception to justice but a precondition for it: without mercy, "just" outcomes become structurally impossible, because the system as currently constituted cannot distinguish guilt from poverty, criminality from mental illness, or dangerousness from Blackness under conditions of extreme social deprivation. Mercy, on this reading, is not what you add to justice once the hard work of adjudication is done. It is a corrective lens without which the hard work of adjudication cannot be done accurately in the first place.

This reframing carries a theological undertone that Stevenson, raised in a Black church tradition and unembarrassed by moral language that secular legal writing often avoids, does not shy away from. He is willing to use words like brokenness and redemption without the ironic distance that might make them more palatable to an audience of lawyers and policy analysts. It is a risk, and it mostly pays off, because Stevenson earns the vocabulary through specificity rather than assertion. When he writes about his own capacity for judgment and cruelty recounting, with unusual candor, moments of his own anger and exhaustion—the theological frame stops being decoration and starts functioning as genuine self-implication. The book's moral authority rests partly on Stevenson's refusal to exempt himself from the categories he applies to everyone else.

A Memoir That Distrusts the Memoir Form

It is worth noting, too, what *Just Mercy* declines to be. Stevenson has a genuinely remarkable biography—Harvard Law, MacArthur "genius" grant, decades of Supreme Court advocacy culminating in landmark rulings on juvenile sentencing—and a lesser writer would have built the book around that ascent. Stevenson mostly resists this. His own triumphs are mentioned only as background to institutional success, the chapters dedicated to his own experience of police harassment outside his apartment in Atlanta are lacking in vindications: no turn around, no satisfaction of institutional responsibility, no shrugs, just a shrug from a bureaucracy. One

suspects that this episode is included in the book by Stevenson just because it takes a stance contrary to the narrative arc the rest of the book might be charged of indulging in. In other words, there is a statement that not all stories are redeeming stories—even when told by the storyteller.

Limitations Worth Naming

An intellectually honest review should also register where the book's persuasive strategy has costs. Stevenson's method—building a systemic argument through accumulated individual stories—is rhetorically powerful precisely because it is emotionally legible, but this also means the book spends relatively little time with counter-arguments a skeptical reader might raise: institutional reform efforts already underway, the genuine complexity of balancing prosecutorial discretion against public safety, or the question of what, concretely, ought to replace the mechanisms Stevenson so persuasively indicts. That resistance is not merely hypothetical. Thomas Chapman, the district attorney who ultimately joined Stevenson's motion to dismiss the charges against McMillian, nonetheless maintained afterward that the case's outcome had proved the system worked, declining to concede that anyone had set out to frame an innocent man. The persistence of that view among some of the officials involved suggests that the institutional resistance Stevenson describes is not confined to the years before exoneration; it can outlast the exoneration itself.⁷ This is not quite a flaw. *Just Mercy* is a memoir and an advocacy narrative, not a policy monograph, and it does not claim to be the latter. But readers looking for a blueprint for reform rather than an indictment of the status quo will need to look elsewhere, perhaps to Stevenson's own organization's policy work, to find it.

Conclusion: What the Book Asks of Its Reader

The achievement of *Just Mercy* is not, finally, that it documents injustice—countless reports, statistics, and exposés do that with more comprehensive data. Its achievement is that it makes injustice difficult to hold at arm's length, refusing readers the comfortable position of the informed but untouched observer. By the book's final pages, Walter McMillian is not a statistic representing the roughly one-in-nine ratio of exonerations to executions that researchers and

⁷ 'Just Mercy and the Heartbreaking True Story of Walter McMillian' (n 1).

the film adaptation of the book both cite⁸; he is a specific man whose hands shook, whose humor survived, whose death from dementia years after his release Stevenson attends not as a case closed but as a friend mourning a friend.

McMillian's own account of that ordeal reached far beyond the book itself. Shortly after his release, he testified before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee about the dangers of wrongful capital conviction, and he spent much of the following two decades speaking to students, community groups, and elected officials about his case before his death in 2013. Stevenson's decision to close the book at his friend's bedside rather than at the courtroom door is, in this sense, consistent with McMillian's own choice to keep testifying long after his legal ordeal had formally ended.⁹

That, perhaps, is the book's most quietly radical suggestion: that the reform of any system built on human suffering must begin not with better statistics but with a refusal to look away from the particular. Stevenson does not ask his readers merely to support criminal justice reform in the abstract. He asks them to sit, however briefly and however uncomfortably, in proximity to the specific human costs that abstraction so conveniently hides. Few books manage to be simultaneously this readable and this demanding. *Just Mercy* is one of them.

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⁸ 'A Discussion of Just Mercy in the Criminal Justice System' (Harvard Law Today, 7 February 2020) <<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/a-discussion-of-just-mercy-in-criminal-justice-system>> accessed 18 July 2026.

⁹ 'What Happened To The Real Walter From Just Mercy?' (Refinery29, 25 December 2019) <<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/12/9070850/what-happened-to-real-jamie-foxx-just-mercy-character>> accessed 18 July 2026.