

## Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher: OLHS English

School: OLHS

Book Title: *Just Mercy*

Genre: non-fiction

Author: Bryan Stevenson

Pages: 336

Publisher: Riverhead Books Copyright: 2014

**Summary of *Just Mercy*:** “Bryan Stevenson was a young lawyer when he founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending those most desperate and in need: the poor, the wrongly condemned, and women and children trapped in the farthest reaches of our criminal justice system. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillian, a young man who was sentenced to die for a notorious murder he insisted he didn’t commit. The case drew Bryan into a tangle of conspiracy, political machination, and legal brinkmanship—and transformed his understanding of mercy and justice forever.

*Just Mercy* is at once an unforgettable account of an idealistic, gifted young lawyer’s coming of age, a moving window into the lives of those he has defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of true justice.” - GoodReads

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s): (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)**

*Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson, is a story that explores the different “systems” that are present in current society. The main focus is on the legal system, as Stevenson is a lawyer by profession writing a memoir about his experiences. This book meets the standard of utilizing a non-fiction text and pairs well with the challenge text, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as the plot centers in the town of Monroeville, Alabama which happens to be the basis for Harper Lee’s *Maycomb* in her novel. Both texts deal with the legal system and prompts students to question the different systems that have been implemented and continue to affect our livelihood as Americans.

Additionally, this text serves as an exemplar of the research process. This novel shows the different steps of the research process and what a final, finished product looks like. While reading the novel, students will engage in their own process of research and will ultimately select a relevant social issue that matters to them. This provides student choice in their learning while acquiring the necessary skills to be competent and critical researchers & consumers of media.

Student research will culminate in a written and verbal assignment that will demonstrate their ability to participate and succeed in the many layered steps of research. Students will create a portfolio that will include the following: annotated works c

ited, works cited, credible sources, annotation, research proposal, presentation outline, & written reflection. Students will turn this portfolio into a verbal presentation that explores the more specific parts of their research.

**Connections to the OLSD curriculum map/Common Core for Honors 9 are as follows:**

1. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4](#)
2. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6](#)

3. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7](#)
4. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8](#)
5. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9](#)
6. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10](#)
7. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1](#)

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below.

#### **Review #1: Kirkus Review**

"Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done," proclaims Stevenson's adaptation for younger audiences of his 2014 *New York Times* bestseller, a deeply moving collage of true stories dedicated to transforming the U.S. criminal justice system.

The story begins in 1983, when 23-year-old Stevenson, a Harvard Law intern, found the moral resolve to join the pro bono defense team of a capital punishment case in Georgia. Throughout his journey, he highlights numerous cases that demonstrate unfair policies and practices throughout our criminal justice system. These examples form an incisive critique of mass incarceration resulting from state and federal policy changes in the late 20th century. He continues to lead the Alabama-headquartered Equal Justice Initiative, whose mission it is to protect basic human rights for the most vulnerable. Stevenson argues that, "The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned." These important stories put a human face on statistics and trends and give us tested strategies to reverse the oppressive consequences of racial and economic injustice in our country. This inspiring book will ignite compassion in young readers and show connections between the history of slavery, Reconstruction, and the present day.

This is required reading, embracing the ideals that "we all need mercy, we all need justice, and—perhaps—we all need some measure of unmerited grace." (notes, index) (*Nonfiction. 12-18*)

#### **Review #2: NPR Book Review**

When Bryan Stevenson was in his 20s, he lived in Atlanta and practiced law at the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee.

One evening, he was parked outside his apartment listening to the radio, when a police SWAT unit approached his car, shined a light inside and pulled a gun.

They yelled, "Move and I'll blow your head off!" according to Stevenson. Stevenson says the officers suspected him of theft and threatened him — because he is black.

The incident fueled Stevenson's drive to challenge racial bias and economic inequities in the U.S. justice system.

"[It] just reinforced what I had known all along, which is that we have a criminal justice system that treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent," Stevenson tells *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross. "The other thing that that incident did for me was just remind me that we have this attitude about people that is sometimes racially shaped — and you can't escape that simply because you go to college and get good grades, or even go to law school and get a law degree."

Stevenson is a Harvard Law School graduate and has argued six cases before the Supreme Court. He won a ruling holding that it is unconstitutional to sentence children to life without parole if they are 17 or younger and have not committed murder.

His new memoir, *Just Mercy*, describes his early days growing up in a poor and racially segregated settlement in Delaware — and how he came to be a lawyer who represents those who have been abandoned. His clients are people on death row — abused and neglected children who were prosecuted as adults and placed in adult prisons where they were beaten and sexually abused, and mentally disabled people whose illnesses helped land them in prison where their special needs were unmet.

In one of his most famous cases, Stevenson helped exonerate a man on death row. [Walter McMillian was convicted](#) of killing 18-year-old Ronda Morrison, who was found under a clothing rack at a dry cleaner in Monroeville, Ala., in 1986. Three witnesses testified against McMillian, while six witnesses, who were black, testified that he was at a church fish fry at the time of the crime. McMillian was found guilty and held on death row for six years.

Stevenson decided to take on the case to defend McMillian, but a judge tried to talk him out of it.

"I think everyone knew that the evidence against Mr. McMillian was pretty contrived," Stevenson says. "The police couldn't solve the crime and there was so much pressure on the police and the prosecutor on the system of justice to make an arrest that they just felt like they had to get somebody convicted. ...

"It was a pretty clear situation where everyone just wanted to forget about this man, let him get executed so everybody could move on. [There was] a lot of passion, a lot of anger in the community about [Morrison's] death, and I think there was great resistance to someone coming in and fighting for the condemned person who had been accused and convicted."

But with Stevenson's representation, McMillian was exonerated in 1993. McMillian was eventually freed, but not without scars of being on death row. He died last year.

"This is one of the few cases I've worked on where I got bomb threats and death threats because we were fighting to free this man who was so clearly innocent," Stevenson says. "It reveals this disconnect that I'm so concerned about when I think about our criminal justice system."

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

Title: <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	Author: Harper Lee
Title: <i>The New Jim Crow</i>	Author: Michelle Alexander
Title: <i>The Hate U Give</i>	Author: Angie Thomas
Title: <i>Evicted</i>	Author: Matthew Desmond
Title: <i>Hillbilly Elegy</i>	Author: J.D. Vance
Title: <i>Between the World and Me</i>	Author: Ta-Nehisi Coates

**Document any potentially controversial content:**

- Sexuality: There are specific references to extra-marital affairs & sodomy, since they play an integral part in the trial of Walter MacMillan.
- Ten instances of the word “nigger” used quoting someone in the story. Chapter 11, “Stevenson also got calls at his home threatening to kill him and Walter while calling them ‘dead niggers.’”
- One mention of the word “bitch” appears in a testimony from one of the witnesses brought by the prosecution, “I finally told the group, ‘Well, I can top all you sons ’a bitches, I done put a damn man on death row by lying in damn court.’”

- One mention of the word “shit”, ““That’s why I called you.’ He sounded surprised that there could be any question about his intentions. ‘I’ve been in a group therapy class here. You’re supposed to be real honest. We been talking about honesty for nearly three months. Last week people were talking about all the bad shit that happened to them when they were kids and all the bad things they done.””

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk - X

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9x 10x 11x 12x

Reading level of this title (if applicable):

Lexile Score: 1130L

Ages: 14-17

Date Submitted to Department Chair: 4/2/2019