



Just Mercy

Film Study Guide

Director: Destin Daniel Cretton

2019 | Fiction | 135 Minutes | USA | English | Rated PG-13

<https://www.justmercyfilm.com/>

Synopsis: *Just Mercy* follows lawyer Bryan Stevenson (Michael B. Jordan) and his history-making battle for justice. After graduating from Harvard, Bryan heads to Alabama to defend those wrongly condemned or who were not afforded proper representation, with the support of local advocate Eva Ansley (Brie Larson). One of his first cases is that of Walter McMillian (Jamie Foxx), who, in 1987, was sentenced to die for the murder of an 18-year-old girl, despite a preponderance of evidence proving his innocence. Bryan becomes embroiled in a labyrinth of legal and political maneuverings and overt and unabashed racism as he fights for Walter, and others like him, with the odds—and the system—stacked against them.

Fast Fact:

1. Bryan Stevenson was born in 1959 in Milton, Delaware. Bryan grew up heavily involved in his church, which ingrained in him the idea that “each person in our society is more than the worst thing they’ve ever done.” Milton was a formally segregated city until Bryan entered second grade, though this did not stop segregationist laws and social codes from being upheld.
2. Bryan Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative in 1989, while he was working for the Southern Center for Human Rights in Montgomery, Alabama. The SCHR had received federal funding to provide legal counsel for death row inmates until 1994, when Republicans gained control of Congress in midterm elections and cut off federal funding to such centers. Bryan reopened the EJI as a non-profit in 1994.

3. The EJI has saved over 125 prisoners from death row, and has continued advocating for a number of causes impacting the legal system, like fighting excessive and unjust sentencing, prison overcrowding and ensuring mentally ill defendants receive fair consideration. From 2005-2015 they have successfully campaigned to eliminate the sentencing of children to life without parole, a movement Bryan initiated after the Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that children could not be sentenced to death.

Post-Screening Discussion Questions

1. In the first case we see Bryan attend as an intern, he is tasked with reporting to a death row inmate roughly his same age that he isn't in danger of being executed for at least one year. Why would the story start here, rather than when he starts the EJI? Why would the film focus on one of his earliest cases, rather than a later one when he's more experienced?
2. Twice early in the film we're reminded that Monroe County is the same town where Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel whose story revolves around a black man being tried, convicted, and killed for a crime he clearly did not commit, in part because of his relationship with a white woman. Why did you think of that Monroe's white townspeople are so proud to live where this novel was set? How do you interpret them only taking credit as the place Lee wrote *Mockingbird*, rather than the place whose history inspired it? How might you compare Bryan Stevenson to Atticus Finch?
3. Driving to the city jail to meet potential clients, Bryan sees several prisoners performing community service on the side of the road, and the image of the prisoners and their guards is similar to how many films about slavery depict overseers watching slaves picking cotton. When Bryan talks to Walter's family and neighbors, one of them calls his death sentence "just another way to lynch a black man." What did you think of the film linking the abuses of the prison system to historical violence done against black men? Did you consider this in relation to contemporary issues?
4. In general, the film's color palette is restricted to different shades of white, black, and brown. The bright red of the folder holding the transcript of Ralph Myers' first interrogation is a notable exception, though touches like the muddy green of Bryan's law books on the shelf and Eva's outfits also stand out. What is the effect of this subdued color palette?
5. Compared with many of Michael B. Jordan's other performances, his portrayal of Bryan Stevenson is quietly restrained. Do you think Jordan and Cretton consciously tamped down the sense of his star charisma even as they're so attentive to other aspects of Bryan Stevenson's personality? How does Jordan's performance impact your impression of Bryan?
6. What did you think of Eva Ansley, who is both the only white person on Bryan's side for a long stretch of the film and the most significant female character in the movie? Why do you think she is often outside of scenes like the meeting with McMillian's friends and family or Herbert Richardson's execution, which are significant moments for Bryan relating to the black

community of Monroe County?

7. How would you describe Monroe County's black community, not just Walter and his family and friends but the other prisoners we meet? What does it say about them and their history with the law that Bryan Stevenson showing up to speak with them in person is a sign of dedication strong enough for most of them to trust him completely?
8. Did it seem that the information Bryan was looking for about Walter's case was easy to find? What does it mean that these documents and testimonies were often so accessible but not given consideration by police and lawyers? How did this impact your overall sense of Walter's case, where the obstacle is not necessarily proving his innocence but getting white officials to believe the evidence?
9. How did you compare the story of Walter McMillian to Herbert Richardson, who knows he is guilty of the crime he is sentenced for but did not have any evidence presented at his trial that might have given him a lighter sentence?
10. Looking at the photos of the real people in the end credits, it seems like the actors were not cast or made up to look exactly like the real people they played, beyond finding matching wigs. What do you think changes by casting actors who look more like the real characters, or by cosmetically changing this cast to match the people they're playing? Why does it matter that we're watching recognizable stars in some roles and less familiar actors in others?
11. *Just Mercy* shares Bryan Stevenson's profound empathy, showing consideration not just for him and his allies but figures like the witness Ralph Myers and D.A. Tommy Chapman. Were you surprised by this? Is there anyone whose perspective the film doesn't seem interested in?
12. How do you relate to the film as an argument against the death penalty?

Useful links and resources :

The Equal Justice Initiative's website, which includes information on Stevenson's book, the film, the organization's ongoing activities, and contemporary political news. <https://eji.org/>

The Innocence Project's website, another organization founded several years after the EJI with the same goal of exonerated unjustly convicted death row inmates. <https://www.innocenceproject.org/>

Interview with Destin Daniel Cretton, Bryan Stevenson, and the film's cast at this year's Toronto International Film Festival. The Q&A begins about fifteen minutes into the video, preceded by speeches from Cretton and Stevenson. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-dcmkfsvlg>