Bryan Stevenson has won many prestigious awards for his legal advocacy and social justice work as a lawyer and founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama, including a MacArthur “genius” grant, a Lannan Foundation Prize for Human and Civil Rights, the Ford Foundation Visionaries Award, and the NAACP William Robert Ming Advocacy Award, as well as 16 honorary degrees. Stevenson’s powerful first book, Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, a chronicle of what led him to create EJI and his experiences representing death-row inmates and individuals sentenced as minors to life without parole, became a critically acclaimed best-seller that landed on numerous “best books” lists across the country. In demand as a speaker all around the world, Stevenson graciously made time for an interview with Booklist as this year’s winner of the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction.

BKL: In your introduction to Just Mercy, you describe growing up in “a poor, rural, racially segregated settlement” on the coast of Delaware. Did books play a role in your childhood? Did you have access to a public library?

STEVENSON: Although we were poor, my mother believed deeply in the power of a book. Her grandfather was born into slavery but learned to read while enslaved at great risk. He taught my grandmother that reading was a great weapon to battle forces that might destroy you. My mother taught me the same thing. She bought me Dr. Seuss books when I was very small and read to me constantly. My mother thought books had enormous power and she wanted all of her children to discover the magic of literature. I grew up in the country and we had cats outside our house. When I was learning to read, my mother would ask me to read my Dr. Seuss book to the cat or to the trees and birds just to keep me reading. She would say to me all the time, “You make me so happy when I see you reading. I love to see you reading.” Reading became a powerfully endorsed and affirmed act in our house.
My mother actually went into debt to buy the Dr. Seuss books. The nearby public library was racially segregated when we were small so she refused to use it or to take us there. She insisted on buying World Book Encyclopedia on a book-a-month plan and this created a lot of additional debt for our family, which was a source of some tension. But each month the arrival of the new encyclopedia book was a big deal and my brother, sister, and I would gather around our mother to read through each new edition with great joy.

My mother constantly bought books that she read for herself, and it had a huge impact on me as a child. The time she would spend reading made me curious about what was so interesting in these books. I became a reader at a very early age because of my mother and her love of books, and it has never left me.

BKL: What inspired you to major in philosophy in college? Did your concern with the big questions in life stem from injustices you observed and experienced? Did reading play a role in this?

STEVENSON: I started as a history and political science major, but I was interested in the why behind history not just the dates and facts. I was deeply troubled with society’s capacity to tolerate abuse and oppression. Philosophy was a discipline that seemed to struggle over and explore big questions, which appealed to me. I was interested in resolving the contradictions that surrounded me growing up in racial segregation. Literature and philosophy were the portals that allowed me to explore the things that concerned me, and I never tired of the quest.

Reading played a big role in shaping my academic interests. When I was in high school, I read Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, and the book haunted me because it spoke to a social reality that I could understand and to which I could bear witness. The book did more than descriptively investigate the political and social landscape of race in America; it also provoked me to see myself through a profoundly different lens. Invisible Man awakened awareness about the power of narrative that I hadn’t fully discovered before. It didn’t necessarily make me want to be a writer, but it did make me understand in a new way the power of writing.


I love Du Bois, and he was definitely an influence. But a lot of other writers really shaped my thinking about the power of narrative as well. As a college student, I fell in love with the great Russian writers. Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn were really big influences. I read The Brothers Karamazov over and over again throughout college.

Dostoyevsky made every character complicated and nuanced in ways
that made quick judgments about a person’s worth difficult. In his novels, good people frequently made bad decisions, and people presumed bad often did incredibly kind and redemptive things when you least expected it. I loved that. Victor Hugo, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison were also really significant writers for me. Their styles were different but all had important things to say about big, complex issues and questions.

BKL: Did you want to be a writer when you were a student?
STEVENSON: I can’t honestly say I ever imagined being a writer. My grandmother would often say to me, “One day you’ll be a preacher or a writer.” For her, these were the most important people in society. As the daughter of people who were enslaved, she didn’t know any lawyers or university professors so those weren’t roles she could imagine. But I was always persuaded she would think those jobs would be okay too. When I finished this book, I have to say that I did think about my grandmother, who died many years ago, and I want to believe she would be very proud.

BKL: You write so movingly about the historical context for the suffering, lack of mercy, and injustice endemic to today’s mass incarcerations and extreme punishment. Do we need to more actively address the full truth about racial inequality in the justice system? How can we begin to do this?

STEVENSON: I do believe we have a history of racial injustice in this country that we have failed to address or to discuss adequately. I fear we have inherited a legacy of discrimination and racial bias that continues to compromise our ability to do justice. To confront this problem, I think we have to commit to truth and reconciliation in a way that we’ve never really done before in America. In the American South, where I live, the land is littered with monuments and markers to the confederacy. We love to talk about mid-nineteenth-century history, but we don’t talk about slavery. This distorts our relationship to history and to how we think about ourselves. So, I think we need to talk about slavery and its legacy. Slavery fostered a narrative of racial difference we have yet to overcome or even acknowledge. The ideology of white supremacy created a long-standing barrier to justice and fair treatment of everyone we have yet to overcome.

My project, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), has put up slave markers to memorialize Montgomery, Alabama’s slave trade history, and I think it’s been quite useful in changing the narrative. I want to memorialize and place markers at the locations where lynchings took place in the U.S. to raise consciousness about our history of racial injustice. What Germany has done to recover from the Holocaust by creating
markers, monuments, and museums is difficult but necessary. In that
country, you are encouraged to go to the memorials and museums at
the Holocaust sites to reflect soberly on that horrific legacy. We do the
opposite in the U.S. We deny and diminish the impact of our long
history of racial injustice against Native Americans, Asians, Latinos,
new immigrant communities, and African Americans. We become less
vigilant and resolved in our determination to eliminate this bias,
which has resulted in many of the problems I write about in my book.

BKL: So much of the remarkable work you do involves listening to
people’s stories and then retelling these stories in ways that call
attention to and remedy injustice. Do we value the art of listening
enough?

STEVENSON: I am persuaded that if people saw what I see on a
regular basis, they would insist on reform. They would not accept the
conditions of confinement and the over-incarceration and excessive
punishment that have shaped our era. I think listening is essential to
getting to understanding. My clients have taught me that to be an
effective advocate for them, I have to listen to them. We don’t listen to
each other as carefully as we should, particularly the poor, disfavored,
and marginalized. We tend to assume they don’t have useful things to
say, which is very ignorant. Working with incarcerated people and the
poor has really deepened my understanding of so many things.

BKL: Why did you decide to make Just Mercy a personal narrative?

STEVENSON: I used personal narrative because I was concerned that
people might be reluctant to value the struggles of people with
criminal convictions without some guidance. I also wanted to write
honestly about these issues, and personal narrative can be a structure
that demands retrospection and honest reflection in a way I thought
was important for this topic.

BKL: What was the greatest challenge in writing Just Mercy?

STEVENSON: In truth, one of my challenges in writing this book was
my initial ambivalence about taking time away from my legal work to
write. At first, it seemed selfish and not useful. However, as I
continued writing, I became hopeful that maybe it would allow more
people to see and understand things they wouldn’t otherwise have an
opportunity to discover.

Time remained my greatest challenge. I couldn’t afford to stop my
other work just to write, which would have been ideal. It was
frustrating, at times, to advance the book over a few days and then
have to abandon it for a week to deal with some case or issue. I
suppose working while I wrote kept my mind engaged with the issues.
Some of the chapters describe events and developments that hadn’t
occurred when I started writing.

I began to enjoy the process of writing as I got deeper into the book,
which made the experience much more engaging and meaningful for me. Eventually, the tension I felt between the work I was doing as a lawyer and the work I was attempting as a writer began to fade.

BKL: You write about your terrifying encounter with two hostile policemen near your home. This experience resonates with renewed urgency in light of the increase in publicly exposed incidents of police brutality. President Obama appointed you to a task force formed to look into law enforcement in the U.S. Do you see any signs of hope and change in the current protests and public discussions about excessive and criminal use of force by police officers?

STEVenson: I am hopeful. Our history of racial inequality and our inability to cultivate institutional humility as a civic virtue has made the culture of policing in this country a real problem. We all have implicit bias, but police officers are armed and can become dangerous when they unfairly presume the guilt of someone just because of a person’s race or poverty.

I think there are some courageous leaders within law enforcement who are working hard to reform the culture of policing. They want their officers to be guardians rather than warriors. They understand that public safety is improved when the poorest and most vulnerable communities believe the police are there to protect and serve rather than menace and harass.

We have a lot of work to do to reform policing. Different training of officers, more diversity within departments, different policies that advance community policing, and greater civilian and citizen oversight are crucial for twenty-first-century policing. But I think the tragedies of the last year have motivated a lot of people to take reform on in a much more earnest way, which does encourage me.

BKL: What effect do you hope Just Mercy will have on readers?

STEVenson: I hope it makes people more thoughtful about our criminal justice system and the need to prioritize fairness over finality, justice over fear and anger. Many of the problems I describe exist because too many of us have been indifferent or disinterested in the poor and most vulnerable among us who are victimized by our system. I’d love for readers to find a way to get involved in the reform efforts that are growing. There are so many incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people in every community that there is no shortage of opportunities to provide support or assistance. I’m also persuaded we can improve public safety and reduce the population of people whose lives are tragically disrupted by violent crime or abuse. But that requires a deeper commitment to more justice, more hope, and more mercy. If readers think more deeply about these issues and support reform, I’ll be thrilled.