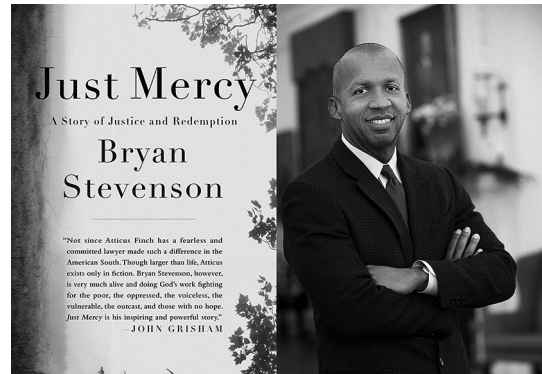


### Counsel against despair

**Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption**, by Bryan Stevenson, Scribe, RRP£14.99/Spiegel & Grau, RRP\$28, 352 pages

adapted from a **Review by Raymond Bonner**

1 Between 1990 and 2005, the US erected new prisons at the staggering and historically unprecedented rate of one every 10 days. Just in time, it seems — today there are more than 2m people in American jails, with another 6m on probation or parole. One in every three black male babies born in this century is likely to end up in prison.



2 Statistics such as these can be 20. But in the hands of Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who has fought for nearly 30 years to put more "justice" into the American criminal justice system, they acquire meaning, a human face. *Just Mercy* is as deeply moving, poignant and powerful a book as has been, and maybe ever can be, written about the death penalty, and the failures of the administration of criminal justice.

3 Stevenson grew up poor in a segregated community. As a lawyer, he has experienced racism first-hand — strip-searched by a redneck prison guard; challenged by gun-toting police while in his car listening to music in the predominately white Atlanta neighbourhood where he lived; questioned by a judge as to why he was sitting at counsel table. Yet Stevenson offers us only snippets of his personal life, for he has not written a book about himself. He doesn't indulge in self-pity or self-righteousness. He just tells stories, real stories — some of which will make you gasp at the inhumanity of humankind.

4 My only quibble with *Just Mercy* is that Stevenson renders conversations in quotation marks, conversations that happened years ago — with his clients, with guards, with colleagues, with people he meets at the courthouse. This is, in my opinion, a practice that mars too many memoirs and non-fiction narratives. (I also cannot fathom why the publisher did not spend a few dollars on an index, the absence of which will diminish the usefulness of this book for the high school, university and law school courses where it should be required reading.) Be clear, however, those objections do not weaken the substance and importance of this book, which comes at a moment when conservatives have joined liberals in calling for reform of America's criminal justice system.

- 5 One significant reform might be achieved without legislation or money: prosecutors could live up to their 23. Contrary to the common understanding, the primary duty of the prosecutor is not to gain a conviction but to do justice. Most of the time they are synonymous; but not always. Examples of prosecutorial misconduct permeate *Just Mercy*.
- 6 To gain a capital conviction of Walter McMillian, a hard-working, semi-literate black man, for the murder of an 18-year-old white woman, the prosecutor put up three witnesses who lied under oath; one was threatened with the death penalty if he didn't tell the story the state wanted. Years later, when a man came forward with evidence that another of the witnesses had lied, the prosecutor threatened to indict him for perjury. (Stevenson weaves McMillian's saga through his book with as much suspense as any Scott Turow novel.) A book could be written about prosecutorial misconduct; only a page or two would be needed to record those prosecutors who have ever been sanctioned.
- 7 Stevenson is one of those individuals who manages to see the "better angels of our nature" and, amid all the horrifying accounts of injustice, he finds grace, dignity, humanity. It will be impossible for readers not to be affected by the description of one act of decency by a prison guard, or by the story of an elderly black woman, "Mrs Williams", who with head high, impeccably dressed in scarf and hat, summoned the courage not to let a policeman wielding a German shepherd deter her from walking into the courthouse. "Attorney Stevenson, I'm here," she pronounced proudly.
- 8 Representing men and women condemned to die exacts a heavy toll, physically and emotionally. After finishing a phone call with another client shortly before he was executed, Stevenson could not hold back the tears. "The lack of compassion I witnessed every day had finally exhausted me . . . I realized my life was just full of brokenness. I worked in a broken system of justice. My clients were broken by mental illness, poverty, and racism," he reflects. *"It's time to stop. I can't do this any more,"* he writes, the italics his. But, of course, he can't stop, and because he doesn't a few more lives will be saved, in a system that is broken.

*FT Weekend, 2015*