The 2017 Loyola University Maryland
Common Text: A Resource for Students
“Just Mercy” by Bryan Stevenson

Each year, Loyola chooses a Common Text for all first-year students to read before arriving on campus. During Fall Welcome Week, the entire Class of 2021 will convene and you will discuss this text with your academic advisor and your fellow students in your Messina group. It is important that you read the text with care and come prepared to discuss the ideas presented in this study guide. The Common Text is considered “common reading” and may be included in Messina course discussions, tests, or assignments. We will also sponsor lectures and events throughout the year to address themes raised in the text.
Introduction

During your time on campus, the Class of 2021 will join the Loyola community to explore what it means to be an Ignatian Citizen. The Loyola University Strategic Plan, 2017-2022 describes Ignatian citizens as people who "think of themselves as part of something larger, as responsible for the betterment of our shared world; as men and women who think and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.” As citizens living and learning in Baltimore in 2017, we must grapple with the gritty realities that contribute to systemic inequality in our city and beyond. To that end, we have selected Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy” as the 2017-18 Loyola Common Text.

“Just Mercy” is a compelling account of a lawyer who defends “the poor, the wrongly condemned, and those trapped in the furthest reaches of our criminal justice system.” Stevenson pairs personal accounts of people enduring lifelong convictions with research that demonstrates how race, class, and power contribute to proliferation of the largest prison population in the world.

Loyola faculty members, administrators, and students chose this book largely because of the powerful questions it raises about fairness and justice in a democratic society. Opportunities for us to engage in interdisciplinary discussions about civil rights, social activism, crime, equality, poverty, and mental health issues abound. Furthermore, Stevenson challenges us to consider our role in advocating for positive change.
“Just Mercy” promises an introduction to the depth of thought, imagination, and challenge you can expect from your time at Loyola. We look forward to reading along with you and entering into a conversation that enlightens and enriches your experience.

**Questions and Issues to Consider: The Call to “Get Close”**

- Stevenson remembers his grandmother telling him throughout his childhood, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.” How do we see the author getting close to issues of punishment and mass incarceration throughout the book? What are some examples of Stevenson getting close to the incarcerated people he works with? How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect his life? Stevenson writes that injustice occurs when “we allow fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us.” As you begin your collegiate studies, how will you get close to the issues that are most important to you?

- Why do you think Stevenson chose to alternate chapters between two narratives? How does his writing style allow the reader to “get close” to Walter McMillan and the problems of the American criminal justice system? How do the two narratives inform both the head and the heart? Was one narrative be more compelling to you than the other? Why?
Questions and Issues to Consider:
The Call to “Get Close” (continued)

- Do you think Stevenson had any idea that representing indigent, incarcerated people was going to be his life’s work? How did he take care of himself while doing difficult and exhausting work? What did he struggle with and what kept him from quitting as he “beat the drum for justice?” As you begin to pursue your own college career and then your own life’s work, how will you stay energized without burning out?

Questions and Issues to Consider:
Poverty, Power, and Justice

- After working with low-income and incarcerated people for many years, Stevenson came to believe that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.” How do you see poverty affecting people’s lives in “Just Mercy”? Are there any examples of poverty and justice existing at the same time? What are some of the different meanings of the word “just” used throughout the book? Have Stevenson’s experiences influenced your own definition of justice?
Questions and Issues to Consider:
Poverty, Power, and Justice (continued)

- Stevenson writes that there are four primary institutions that shape the conversation around race and justice today: slavery, racial terror and the threat of violence against people of color, Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation, and mass incarceration. How do you see these institutions affecting cases throughout the book? What examples of racial discrimination within the legal system can you find in the text? How do we see the history of racial bias in the United States impacting prisons today?

- What examples did Stevenson share of low-income individuals and/or people of color in difficult circumstances being presumed guilty before presenting their cases? He writes, “Executions are an example of how policies and norms are used to control and punish blacks.” Why are 80% of people on death row convicted of crimes against whites while 65% of homicide victims are black? Why is a death sentence more likely if a defendant is black and the victim is white? Do you think race and class should factor into a court case? Please explain your reasoning.
Questions and Issues to Consider:
The Criminal Justice System

- As you read the book, what were your reactions to descriptions of the criminal justice system? Why does the author compare his own brokenness to the brokenness of the system? Do you believe that broken people can be healed? What does it mean to show mercy within a broken system?

- In the epilogue, Stevenson writes, “The real question of capital punishment in this country is, do we deserve to kill?” What was your opinion about capital punishment prior to reading this book? Did reading “Just Mercy” change your opinion about whether or not the United States has the right to execute its citizens? What other questions did this book raise about capital punishment?

- Walter McMillian was the 50th person exonerated from death row in the United States. Today, 146 people have been exonerated, many after serving decades in prison. What challenges do you think formerly incarcerated people, whether deemed innocent or not, face when they reenter their community? What support, if any, do you believe the government should grant former prisoners? Once proven innocent, do you believe an exoneree should receive compensation for their wrongful incarceration? Please explain your reasoning. Why are states, as Alabama was in McMillian’s case, unwilling to accept responsibility for wrongful convictions?
Questions and Issues to Consider:
The Most Vulnerable

- In 2010, in Graham v. Florida, the Supreme Court ruled that sentencing juveniles to life without parole for non-homicides is unconstitutional. And in 2012, in Miller v. Alabama and Jackson v. Hobbs, the Supreme Court ruled that juveniles convicted of murder cannot be subject to a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. According to the ACLU, approximately 2,570 children, some as young as 13 years old, have been sentenced to life without parole in the United States. How does incarceration affect children differently than adults? Do you agree with Stevenson that punishments for children are “intense and reactionary?” Should all juvenile offenders sentenced to life without parole be eligible for a new sentencing hearing? How should families of victims murdered by juveniles be involved in sentencing hearings, if at all? What difficulties or complications could arise within the system if all juveniles sentenced to life without parole are granted new hearings?
Questions and Issues to Consider:
The Most Vulnerable (continued)

- 50% of the people in jail and prison today have a diagnosed mental illness, with 1 in 5 having a serious mental illness. Why is severe mental illness often ignored at trial? Do you believe mentally ill people convicted of crimes should receive different treatment? In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in Atkins v. Virginia that executing individuals deemed to be “mentally retarded” is cruel and unusual punishment. What other protections should be considered for prisoners with proven mental illness, including those who have committed violent offenses?

- What factors prevent mitigating evidence (information about a person’s background and upbringing that may reduce punishment for an offense) from being presented at trial? Why would a judge or a jury lack interest in significant, compelling mitigating evidence? Do you believe Richardson’s sentence would have been different if evidence was presented on his history of abuse, mental illness, PTSD, and military service? What does Stevenson mean when he writes, “We all need mitigation at some point”? 
Questions and Issues to Consider:
The Most Vulnerable (continued)

- Before Richardson’s execution, correctional officers at Holman Prison were helpful and attentive to his requests. Stevenson asks, “Where were these people when he really needed them?” What support do you believe Richardson should have received while he was struggling with childhood sexual abuse, PTSD, and disability? What does this say about the function of prisons today? What do you think the role of prisons should be?

Questions and Issues to Consider:
Historical Trauma

- There are many examples of police traumatizing communities of color throughout the book. Why do you think McMillian’s supporters had to go through a metal detector and past a German Shepherd at his trial? What historical traumas are perpetuated by the criminal justice system today? How is this mirrored by the story “Of the Coming of John” in “The Souls of Black Folk” by W. E. B. Du Bois? When police enter a community wearing military gear, what kind of response does it evoke?
Questions and Issues to Consider:
Historical Trauma (continued)

- Stevenson notes the influence of several books that informed his own opinions about justice, including “The Souls of Black Folk” by W. E. B. Du Bois and “Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II” by Douglas A. Blackmon. How did these books impact him? What authors or books have informed your own opinions about justice?
Further Resources

- Website: The Equal Justice Initiative

- Website: “Just Mercy” Web Page

- Video: Bryan Stevenson TED Talk “We Need to Talk About Injustice”
  [https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice](https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice)

- Article: “Justice Delayed – The Legacy of Lynching, On Death Row” by Jeffrey Toobin

- Article: “Catholic Social Teaching and the Criminal Justice System” by Fred Kammer, S.J.

Study Guide and essay questions courtesy of
Rachel Hudek, Penguin Random House
Common Text Essay Contest

Answer one of the two prompts below using only the Common Text and your intellect. That is, no outside resources are needed in this exercise in reflection and discernment. The goal is original thought inspired by careful reading. Your essay should be no longer than 5 double-spaced, typed pages.

To be eligible, please submit an original essay based on the prompt below to Michael Puma, Co-Director of Messina at messina@loyola.edu no later than midnight on August 17, 2017. Three prizes of $350 each will be awarded. We will celebrate the winners during Fall Welcome Weekend at the Common Text Convocation on September 1.

Essay Contest Prompts (choose either A or B):

A. Stevenson writes, “Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done (p. 18).” Imagine if others judged you on the worst thing you have ever done. In what ways does the current criminal justice system in America judge people based on their worst? How might our criminal justice system (sentencing, incarceration, release) encourage and support people to be their best?
Essay Contest Prompts (choose either A or B): (continued)

B. “Just Mercy” begins with information about Bryan Stevenson growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. He remembers his grandmother telling him, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close” (14). How does Stevenson get close to the incarcerated people he is helping? Be able to cite specific examples of both success and failure in doing so as well as the toll “getting close” takes on him. How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect Stevenson’s life? How does “getting close” relate to Loyola’s core values and Ignatian Citizenship?

Questions?

Contact the Messina Office at 410-617-2669 or visit www.loyola.edu/Messina for a list of academic and support services available to Loyola students, including resources to help you make the transition to campus and college life.
2017-18 Loyola University Maryland Common Text Event

Loyola Welcomes Author

Bryan Stevenson

**AMERICAN INJUSTICE:**
**MERCY, HUMANITY AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Monday, March 19, 2018

6:00 PM

McGuire Hall