

Tim Madigan*

Book One

***Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*
by Bryan Stevenson**

Spiegel & Grau, 2014

ISBN 978-0-8129-9453-7

Although first published six years ago, *Just Mercy* is very much in the popular press again this year—partially due to a film being made starring Michael B. Jordan, and partially because of the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. As is typically the case, there is much more to the book than there is to the movie, which focusses on the case of Walter McMillian, a Black man wrongfully convicted of murder. A couple other poignant stories of Stevenson's other clients are intertwined in the fictionalized film, but the stories of the people incarcerated in *Just Mercy* are all too real.

Just Mercy is a critique of the American judicial system. Bryan

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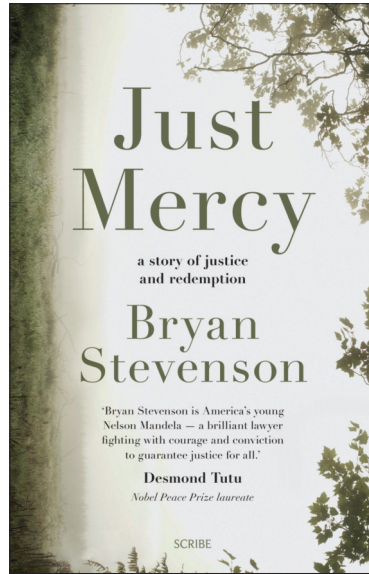
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Stevenson begins the book as a law student from Harvard sent to meet a man condemned to death for the first time. After finishing law school, Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative and moved to the Deep South to defend those who had no recourse to a proper defense.

Walter McMillian's story has all the drama of a legal thriller. The local authorities needed to make an arrest of somebody for the killing of a young girl, and were eager to look Walter's way when questionable

eyewitness testimony came. The witness was looking to lessen his own jail time, and at least 15 of Walter's family members and neighbors were with him at his own home at the time of the murder. Still, Stevenson has to truly battle if he is going to save McMillian's life as local officials political aspirations hinge on not admitting the wrong man has been convicted.

The goal of *Just Mercy* is understanding mass incarceration and extreme punishment in the United States, where the prison population has grown from 300,000 people in the 1970s to over 2,300,000 at the time of publication. Stevenson cites "One in every fifteen people born in the United States in 2001 is expected to go to jail or prison; one in every three black male babies born in this century is expected to be incarcerated." A large portion of the book is dedicated to minors (typically sixteen or seventeen year-olds) sentenced to death or life in



prison. Stevenson fights this to the highest level and argues in front of the U.S. Supreme Court and wins, life without the possibility of parole is now unconstitutional for children.

A driving force for all these injustices is money, as the privatization of the prison system across the country incentivizes mass incarceration. While most of the book takes place in the Deep South, no area of the country is free from criticism here. Stevenson indicts all of America, "...we have to reform a system of criminal justice that continues to treat people better if they are rich and guilty than if they are poor and innocent".

Called America's Mandela by Bishop Desmond Tutu, much of Stevenson's motivation arises from his familial and religious upbringing, concluding "...mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving".

Book Two

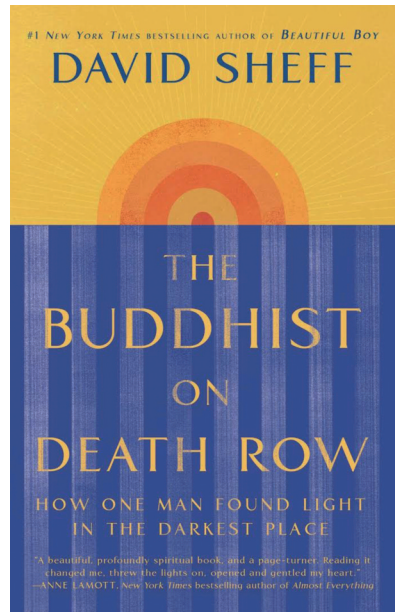
The Buddhist on Death Row: How One Man Found Light in the Darkest Place **by David Sheff**

Simon & Schuster, 2020

ISBN 978198218456

Jarvis Jay Masters was already incarcerated when he was wrong-

fully convicted of taking part in the murder of a prison guard and was sentenced to death as a result. This is a slow process in the United States; Masters has awaited lethal injection since 1990. This is now unlikely to happen as California has a moratorium suspending all capital punishment. Still, Masters has been imprisoned the majority of his life, including 22 years of solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is very controversial,



and typically used for the convicts considered most dangerous. But having only one to two hours a day of human contact nearly always has a negative impact on a person's physical, emotional and mental health.

A victim of a brutal and violent childhood that is touched on by Sheff, Masters covers it in more detail in the two books he wrote himself: *Finding Freedom* (1997) and *That Bird Has My Wings* (2009). Coming in to prison in San Quentin at 19, Masters was violent and never backed down from a fight. He grew up thinking every slight had to be responded to, and usually violently.

Masters was introduced to breathing exercises and Buddhism by a criminal investigator as a way to cope with stress. Through the course of the book, he goes back to reflect on the pain he had caused. Through a series of Buddhist advocates from the outside, he learns to face

painful issues in his life and not to deny them anymore—to seek the middle path.

One of the most painful memories for Masters though, was not of the beatings or separation from his family at such a young age, but an off-hand comment from the judge when he received his death sentence. She sympathized with his upbringing and did not believe in the death penalty, but felt that she had no choice but to follow the law when she said “If people don’t want children, they shouldn’t have them.” Masters took this to mean that he should never have been born, and that the world would be a better place without him.

Sheff takes us through Masters spiritual evolution. As he makes amends with his family, is considered family by his Buddhist community, and learns to help his fellow inmates—a group of people suffering mightily. Masters talks about numerous suicides in prison, and people slowly going insane, especially in solitary confinement. Masters comes to terms—or, as best as one can—with spending his life in prison, and even goes as far as to say prison saved his life, as he would not have altered the destructive path he was on otherwise. Sheff takes us through the emotional draining appeals process and the highs and lows of Masters’ relationships as he learns to make the world a better place with him in it.