

RACIAL JUSTICE COMMUNITY BOOK READ PARTICIPANTS' GUIDE
JUST MERCY: A STORY OF JUSTICE AND REDEMPTION, BRYAN STEPHENSON

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the Racial Justice Community Book Read of *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson's book about his work on behalf of people facing wrongful convictions and excessive punishments in the U.S. criminal justice system. His memoir provides examples of the cases of men, women, and children who have been condemned by racial, economic, and other forms of injustices in the legal system and across American society. Stevenson shares his insights and experiences fighting for social justice, and his hopes and views about the personal and institutional transformations that must occur to make our society more just. Through our discussions of *Just Mercy*, we hope that the Syracuse/CNY community will find understanding, information, and inspiration to commit our individual and collective lives to address injustices wherever they exist across our communities. We look forward to your participation in this community dialogue. Our Facilitators will help to stimulate greater understanding and support productive conversations about race and racial injustice through the book and participants' responses to their reading and experiences.

Addressing systemic racism and injustice calls for deeper awareness of oppression in U.S. society, locally and nationally. This includes acknowledging police brutality, power, privilege, and White supremacy, and how they create and systems of inequality. Confronting our individual roles that contribute to racist systems in our society can cause discomfort. Realizing the effects of these systems on our lives can cause vulnerability. Yet, such discomfort and vulnerability can be catalysts toward the changes that are necessary to transform ourselves, our communities, and our society toward greater justice and humanity. Through our discussions of *Just Mercy*, we hope that the Syracuse/CNY community will find knowledge, information, and inspiration to commit our individual and collective lives to dismantling systemic barriers to justice wherever they exist across our communities.

MEETING FORMAT

Book read discussions will take place on Mondays at 6:00-7:30 pm, on Zoom:

<https://sulaw.zoom.us/j/95720520332>

We will meet in small group discussions that will be moderated by facilitators. Small groups will discuss questions or topics related to the specific chapters for that week's meeting. Small groups will come back together for the whole group to share experiences or insights from their small group discussions.

You may find it helpful to keep a journal to help you further explore ideas that came up during your reading of the book and the group discussions. This will provide an opportunity for you look back over time and track how your thoughts and behaviors have changed over the course of the book read.

PREPARATION

Participants do not have to read the complete book in order to participate in book discussion. However, participants are expected to read the designated chapters for the weekly sessions. The reading schedule is below. On Friday at 3:00 pm, we will post questions and discussion topics for the book meetings on the next Monday session.

CHAPTER DISCUSSION SCHEDULE: MONDAYS, SEPTEMBER 14-NOVEMBER 23, AT 6:00-7:30 PM, ZOOM

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14: Introduction: Higher Ground, and Chapter 1: Mockingbird Players

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21: Chapter 2: Stand, and Chapter 3: Trials and Tribulations

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28: **YOM KIPPUR. NO MEETING**

MONDAY, OCTOBER 5: Chapter 4: The Old Rugged Cross, and Chapter 5: Of the Coming of John

OCTOBER 12: Chapter 6: Surely Doomed, and Chapter 7: Justice Denied

OCTOBER 19: Chapter 8: All God's Children, and Chapter 9: I'm Here

OCTOBER 26: Chapter 10: Mitigation, and Chapter 11: I'll Fly Away

NOVEMBER 9: Chapter 12: Mother, Mother, and Chapter 13: Recovery

NOVEMBER 16: Chapter 14: Cruel and Unusual, and Chapter 15: Broken

NOVEMBER 23: Chapter 16: The Stonecatchers' Song of Sorrow, Epilogue, and Postscript

GROUND RULES

The book discussions will happen online on Zoom: <https://sulaw.zoom.us/j/95720520332>

- Sessions will begin and end on time.
- Listen with respect. There will be one speaker at a time. Please stay on mute when you are not speaking.
- Remain engaged. Active listening and active sharing will enhance the experience for everyone in the discussion.
- We do not expect everyone to agree during the book discussions. However, it is important that people express their views in constructive and respectful ways that opens up a point for discussion, rather than shutting down discussion.
- If you are someone who often speaks up, be sure that you are also allowing opportunities for others to participate. If you are someone who is hesitant to speak in groups, use this opportunity to expand your ability to express yourself in this way.
- Assume good intentions. We must come to the discussions with good intentions when we speak and listen, and we must assume the good intentions of other participants for these reasons.
- Do not make dismissive statements toward other people's comments. Even if you disagree, take the conversation back to the book rather than saying "That's ridiculous." Try to avoid making people feel embarrassed or defensive, so that the conversation remains open.

- Confidentiality is important. You may share the ideas from the discussions with your friends and acquaintances, however, personal statements and experiences should remain confidential. Do not share someone else's story without their permission.
- Note the difference between *agreement* and *understanding*. Consider whether "I don't agree" may actually mean "I don't understand."
- A strong opinion is not the same as informed knowledge.
- We do not have to be aware of racism in order for it to exist.
- Support your views with specific passages from the book. It may be helpful to write page numbers, take notes or highlight passages that make a particular impact on you.

ADDITIONAL BOOK THOUGHTS

In addition to particular topics that we will discuss each week, below are additional areas that you can consider as you read *Just Mercy*:

- What are the central ideas discussed in the book? Are they personal, professional, political, etc.?
- Do the issues discussed in the book affect your life? How so?
- What are your earliest experiences dealing with race and/or racism?
- How do you benefit from your racial identity(ies)?
- What does it mean to be White?
- How does the author support the ideas in the book? Are the ideas meant to be informative, persuasive, challenging, definitive, or open to question?
- What kind of language does the author use? Does it require special knowledge or can anyone understand the writing? What tone, perspective, or techniques does the author use?
- What are the implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term implications to the issues that are raised in the book? Are they alarming? Hopeful? Negative? Affirming?
- What solutions does the author propose? Are they concrete? Are they solutions that you think should or can be or should be implemented in your community?
- What particular passages in the book struck you as significant? Informative? Disturbing? Memorable?

- What have you learned after reading this book? Has it broadened your knowledge? Deepened your awareness? Introduced you to people, communities, or issues that you had not considered previously?
- What will you do to address systemic racism and institutionalized inequality after reading this book? The work doesn't end after reading the book. Reading and discussing the book is only the beginning. The book discussions are a space where participants can share how they are translating the words they have absorbed into action, and holding each other accountable for doing the same.