

TEACHING & LEARNING THROUGH THE BLOCK'S COLLECTION



JUST MERCY

A STORY OF JUSTICE AND REDEMPTION

ONE BOOK ONE NORTHWESTERN 2020 - 21

In *Just Mercy*, the 2020–21 One Book One Northwestern selection, author Bryan Stevenson calls on each of us to reckon with the failings of a complex, unfairly harsh, and often unaccountable criminal justice system. **This selection of artworks from The Block's collection reflects on themes, events, and ideas from *Just Mercy*.** Works by ten artists—contemporary and historic—amplify and deepen our engagement with the book by bringing different backgrounds and perspectives into dialogue with it. The artworks address such issues as systemic racism, discrimination, and failures of the justice system, alongside artworks that allow us to reflect on racial and economic injustice and social inequities through a broader lens.

Just Mercy also reminds us that compassion and empathy are fundamental to our own human dignity. In connection with the book, the artworks presented speak to Stevenson's belief that "the true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, the condemned." We invite the Northwestern community to use these works as an opportunity to connect to the themes of the text, whether they be used as a springboard for private contemplation or discussion with others. If you are interested in collaborating with us in your research or teaching, contact Block Curatorial Associate Melanie Garcia Sympson at melanie.sympson@northwestern.edu.

TEACHING "JUST MERCY" THROUGH THE BLOCK'S COLLECTION

The Block Museum is proud to partner with the **One Book** program for a year of art and events that explore the themes of this shared text.

[VIEW WORKS IN BLOCK
COLLECTION DATABASE](#)

[DOWNLOAD HI-RES IMAGE
PACKAGE AND CAPTIONS](#)



Donna Ferrato (American, born 1949)
Women who Killed in Self defense serve 3 times longer than the Men who Killed their wives
1989
Inkjet print
Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
gift of David Kieselstein KGSM '88, 2016.16.10

In this photograph, an imprisoned woman on the top bunk looks out from her cell and exchanges glances with a guard, whose dark outline contrasts with the stark white background. The two figures are represented as visual opposites, yet they are intimately connected by their respective roles in the carceral system. The artist Donna Ferrato, who spent over a decade photographing subjects related to domestic violence, provides the image with a long title that asks us to consider the gender disparities in prison sentencing. Of the works in this series, the artist writes, “I hope you will contemplate this: There are countless women in prison whose sole crime was to protect themselves and their children from murderous husbands or boyfriends. Many things are shocking about family violence, but none more so than the fact that women are behind bars for trying to save their own lives.” In chapter 12 of *Just Mercy*, “Mother, Mother,” Bryan Stevenson points to the severe and unfair sentences faced by women who are charged for acting in self-defense, are subject to laws that punish mothers in marginalized communities, or are wrongly convicted for crimes they did not commit.



Pat Phillips (born 1987, Lakenheath, England, active in Louisiana)
**Untitled "I got in 1 little graffiti arrest & my mom got scared...
 but my dad lost it when me & the homie didn't take community
 service seriously"**

2019

Acrylic, pencil, airbrush, aerosol paint on paper

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
 gift of James and Sari Klein, 2020.7

In Pat Phillips's mixed-media drawing, graffiti and a spray paint can are shown next to a fist holding the handle of a broken gavel. The artwork calls attention to the experience of Black youth who have been punished excessively in response to a minor transgression—one that is not a serious crime and has no victims—such as defacing property. Through the partially visible graffiti, "....sh Prince," and the title that plays on its theme song, Phillips also recalls the popular 1990s sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which explored the experience of a Black teenager from Philadelphia who is sent to live with his wealthy, out-of-touch relatives in Bel Air after getting in "one little fight."

Phillips's drawing and title speak to the artist's lived experience and his father's position as a Corrections Officer at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola. According to the artist, "my work creates a mythological narrative that explores a black perspective from my many years growing up in suburbia painting graffiti." In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson has included stories about incarcerated youth. The Equal Justice Initiative has worked to free people who had been convicted as juveniles and were incarcerated, for example, in the Louisiana State Penitentiary for more than fifty years. While the infraction in Phillips's drawing is not serious, the title serves to remind the viewer of the extreme punishment and intimidation a young Black defendant may face for crimes in contrast to a white defendant.



Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000)

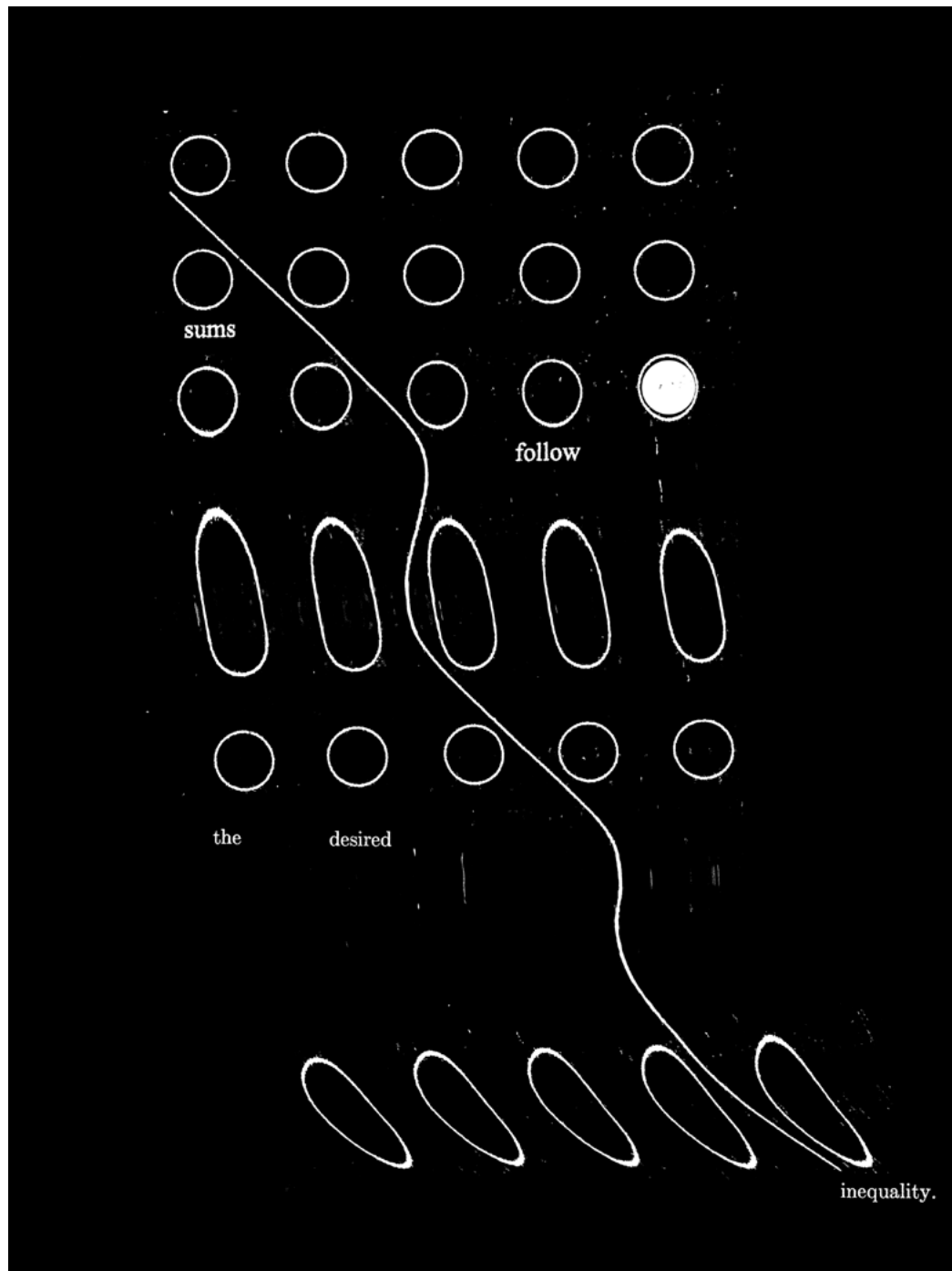
Confrontation on the Bridge

1975

Color screenprint

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
gift of Paul S. D'Amato, LS 1985.3.4

In the mid-1970s, Jacob Lawrence was among over thirty prominent artists invited to contribute to a print portfolio in recognition of the United States Bicentennial. For *An American Portrait, 1776–1976* artists were asked to reflect on American history since 1776. In his artwork, Lawrence depicted an event that took place only about a decade earlier, when in March of 1965 activists organized the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in an effort to fight for the voting rights of African Americans. Lawrence portrays the moment when the marchers are confronted by the National Guard on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. While the Guard is represented by a single snarling, vicious dog baring its teeth on the lower left, the marchers on the right are characterized by their unity. The print is aligned with other artworks by Lawrence, known for representing important moments in African-American history in his distinctive style of abstract modernism. In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson addresses the legacy of this event through the lens of Mrs. Williams (chapter 9, “I’m Here”). Mrs. Williams shows up at the courthouse to support Walter McMillian at a hearing, but she is unable to enter because of the presence of police dogs, which conjured up traumatic memories of her experience in civil rights protests some thirty years earlier. It is a poignant moment in the book that helps us understand the legacy of fear and intimidation imposed by the state on its citizens.



Kameelah Janan Rasheed (American, born 1985)

Sum Follow

2019

Inkjet print on paper

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,

purchase funds provided by the Julie and Lawrence Bernstein

Family Art Acquisition Fund, 2019.18.4

In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson chronicles the seemingly impossible task of working within a legal and carceral system where protocols and systems defy logic. In following Stevenson's fight for the freedom of his client Walter McMillian, the reader begins to understand how the criminal justice system—from the initial arrest to the sentencing protocols—is designed to allow for the continuation of discriminatory practices that have dire consequences.

The artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed uses a visual language familiar to many—rows of circles from a multiple-choice exam—to encourage us to question the logic of systems whose authority might be taken for granted. The print looks like a warped negative of a machine-readable answer sheet, with the circles contorted in a way that undermines the perceived order of the whole exercise. The text, “sums follow the desired inequality,” draws on the language of mathematical proofs, in which a conclusion is demonstrated through a series of logical steps. She also plays on the dual valence of the word “inequality,” innocuous in the context of math, but highly charged in the context of social justice.



William Gropper (American, 1897–1977)
Justice, from the portfolio *The Capriccios*
 1953–56
 Lithograph on paper
 Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
 gift of Evelyn Salk in memory of her husband, Erwin A. Salk,
 2001.21.30

William Gropper's *Justice* is part of a fifty-plate portfolio created after the artist appeared before the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953. One of two artists blacklisted by the government and accused of Communist sympathies, Gropper suffered economic, personal, and artistic repercussions as a result of the censure. His ambitious series is an homage to Francisco de Goya's late 18th-century etching suite, *Los Caprichos*, which famously addressed the folly and irrationality of contemporary society.

Justice, in particular, directly attacks the belief that the judicial system is fair and that justice is blind. In the lower center of the nightmarish scene, Gropper shows the accused, likely innocent, standing small and helpless. The swift and unreasoning figure of Justice swoops in from the upper right as law enforcement holds the accused aggressively. Gropper emphasized the disorientation of space and figural relationships to evoke the surreal and senseless nature of the sentencing. These are themes that are at the center of many stories presented in *Just Mercy*, a text that opens our eyes to how unfair, biased, and irrational the court system can be.



"The Extended Family"

M Burroughs 1996

Margaret Burroughs (American, 1917–2010)

The Extended Family

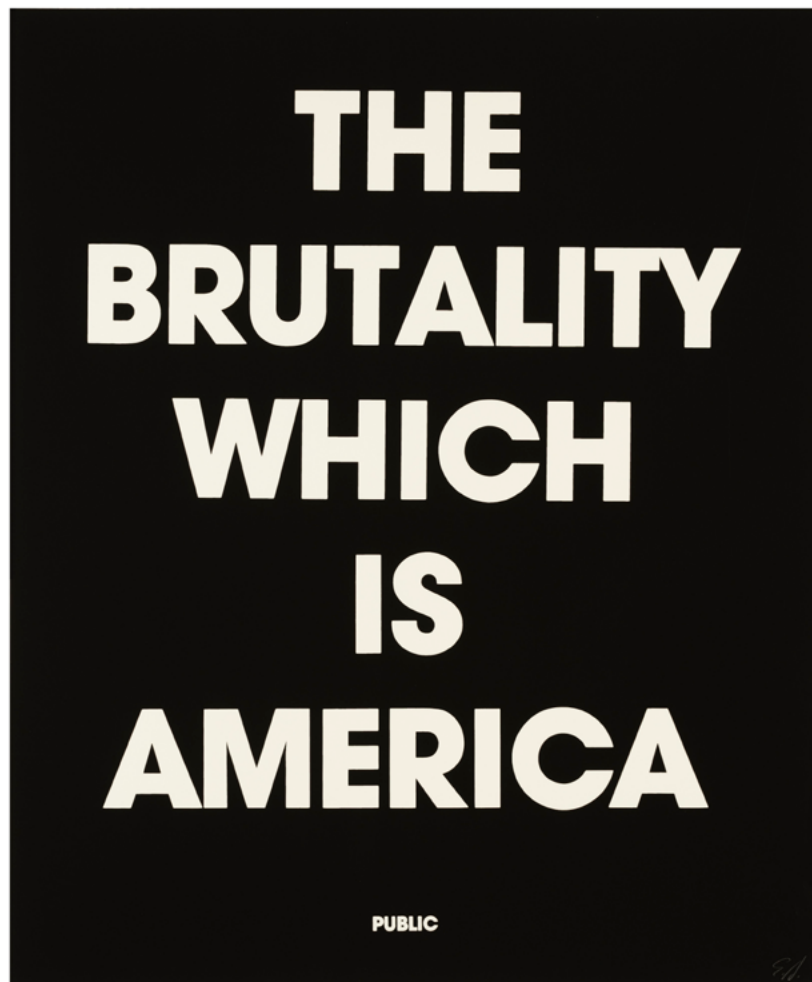
1996

Linoleum cut on paper

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
gift of Margaret Burroughs, 1996.46.6

Just Mercy paints a picture of the ripple effects of incarceration by showing how entire families are directly impacted by the imprisonment of a loved one. In chapter 5, "On the Coming of John," Bryan Stevenson conveys the devastation of Walter McMillian's family through his account of conversations with McMillian's wife, children, and siblings. In this chapter, Stevenson also recognizes the despair felt on the part of the Black community in Monroe County after McMillian's wrongful conviction.

This linoleum cut by Margaret Burroughs, *The Extended Family*, is not a work about the criminal justice system but the artist calls attention to the humanity and connectedness of her subjects in a way that is reminiscent of Stevenson's descriptions. The viewer recognizes the figures both as individuals, each having distinct appearances and personalities, and as members of tight-knit group, physically close together in a shallow space. There is a sense that the part depends on the whole. In addition to Burrough's work as an artist, she was also a prison reformer. Known as co-founder of the DuSable Museum of African American History and the South Side Community Art Center, Burroughs was also an educator who taught writing and visual arts to incarcerated people in prisons in Stateville and Joliet Correctional Centers in Illinois.



Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation, born 1954)
Public Enemy Care for Youth (The Brutality Which Is America)
1992
Screenprints on paper (triptych)
Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art,
Northwestern University, 1994.90.1-3

This striking triptych presents text that is bold and direct in its formal presentation, but invites open interpretation. The first phrase “The Brutality Which Is America,” names brutality as the country’s defining characteristic, a stark contrast to other stock phrases typically used to define America, such as “the land of opportunity.” From there, we learn more about the country’s particular brand of brutality: the

phrases “Raises Mad Dogs / That Were Once Beautiful Children” create a powerful image of violence against unnamed innocents without pinning it down to one particular act.

Edgar Heap of Birds is an Indigenous artist whose work addresses the experiences of Native communities in the United States and confronts the history of violence against them.

The artwork’s enigmatic text offers the space to contemplate what has been willingly overlooked in the writing of American history, and to consider what has been lost in any number of atrocities committed in America’s name. In the context of *Just Mercy*, the juxtaposition of brutality and innocence throughout this artwork calls to mind Bryan Stevenson’s stories of how the promise of youth can go unfulfilled when the criminal

justice system goes unchecked. In chapter 8, “All God’s Children,” Stevenson relays stories of youth whose circumstances—untreated mental health issues, inability to escape neighborhood violence, or simply the color of their skin—have led to extreme sentencing.



Scottsboro Limited
80 prints

Prentiss Taylor
April 1932

Prentiss Taylor (American, 1907 - 1991),
Scottsboro Limited, from the portfolio **Scottsboro**
1932

Lithograph on paper

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
1992.57

In Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931, nine Black boys and men, ranging in age from 13 to 19 years old, were falsely accused of raping two white women on a train. The case became a symbol of the appalling miscarriage of justice and touches on such themes in *Just Mercy* as the failures of the juvenile justice system and harsh and unjust sentencing of African Americans generally and especially in the South. In the first trial, eight were quickly convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to the death penalty. The ninth defendant, 13-year-old Leroy (Roy) Wright, was sentenced to life in prison.

The Scottsboro case became internationally infamous as an example of the systemic and deeply embedded racism of the U.S. court system. The lithograph was created as part of a series to illustrate a play and poems about the case by writer Langston Hughes, and was published in this booklet with proceeds from sales donated to the defense. One of four images in the booklet, it shows the nine defendants huddled closely atop a train. With arms raised the image evokes martyrdom, reinforced in the cross-like forms of the telephone poles. The facts surrounding the Scottsboro case and trial represent a tragic historic precedent for Walter McMillian, the young defendants discussed in *Just Mercy*, and so many other wrongly accused African American people in prison.



Hector Duarte (Mexican and American, born 1952)

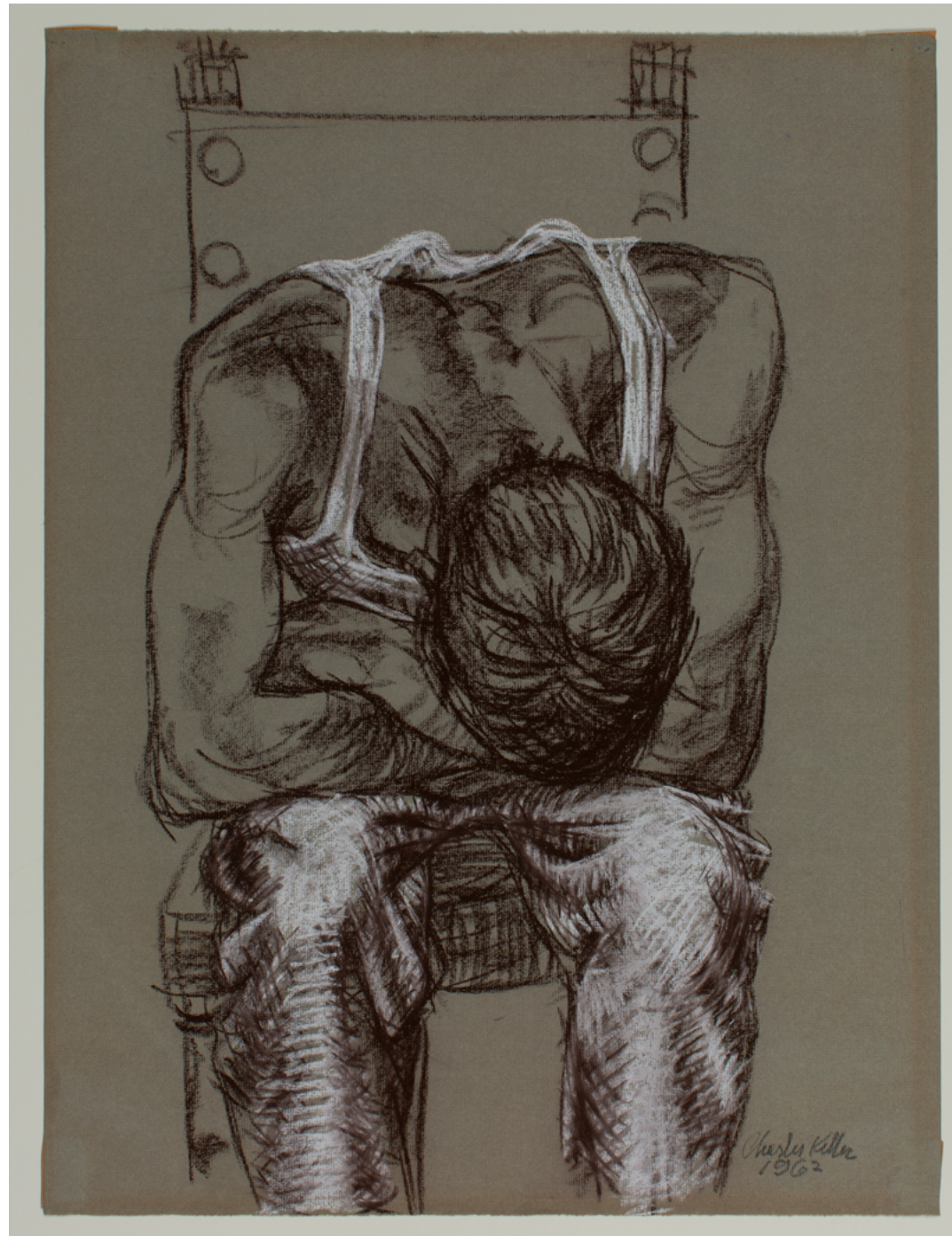
Como te ven te tratan (How they see you, they treat you)

2007

Color linoleum cut on paper

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
gift of Molly Day and John Himmelfarb, 2007.15.3

Hector Duarte is a Mexican and American artist who lives in Chicago and is well-known for his public murals, many of which address the experience of immigration to the U.S. from Mexico and Central and South America. In this print, the outline of a figure in front of a fiery red background forms a familiar composition – a mug shot, a type of photograph used for identification purposes in police records. The human figure is reduced to a fingerprint and a barcode, two methods that are often used by law enforcement to track and surveil. The combination of the title, *How they see you, they treat you*, and the imagery refers to the ways that policing methods result in the dehumanization of marginalized communities. In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson explores the dire consequences of racial profiling – ranging from everyday microaggressions to the loss of human lives. This dehumanization also allows for the mistreatment of incarcerated people whom society has deemed unworthy of rehabilitation.



Charles Keller (American, 1914–2006)

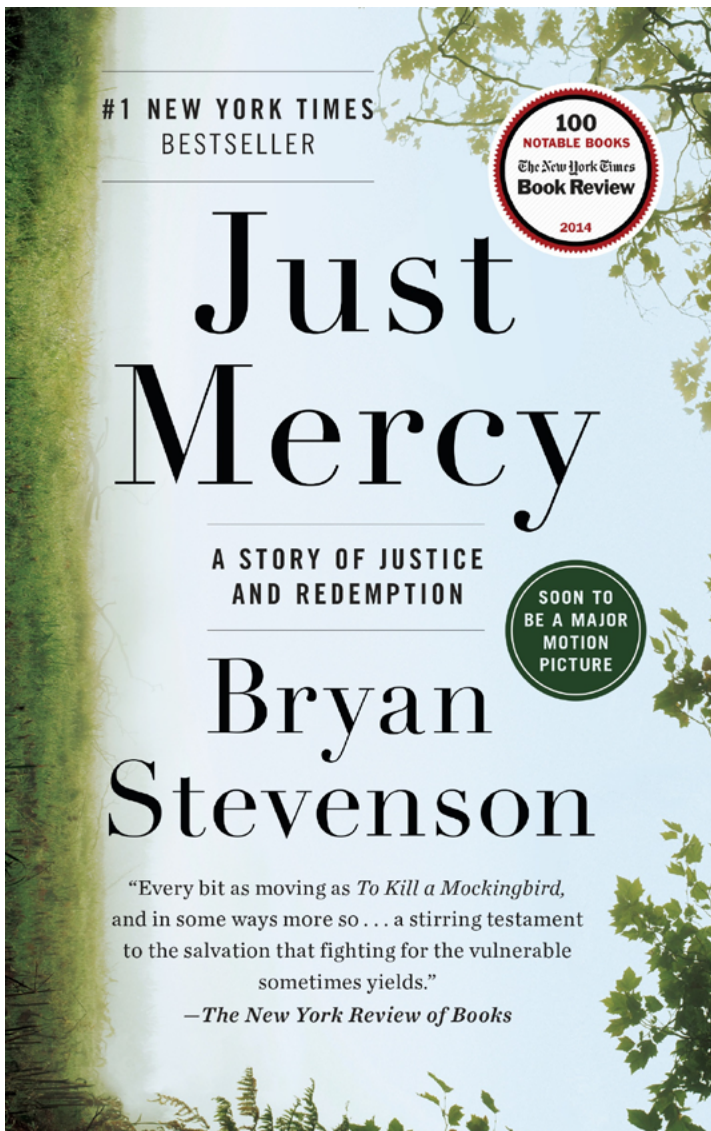
Resting

1962

Pastel on paper

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
gift of the Keller Family, 2016.13.5

Just Mercy is fundamentally a book about struggle—struggle with the justice system or, in author Bryan Stevenson’s words, “the struggle to be equitable and fair with one another.” In Charles Keller’s *Resting*, the physical manifestation of struggle is made visible through the body. In this defeated, depleted individual, we recognize the effects of an unfair system. While the artist likely intended to address the hardships of physical labor or the plight of the poor and marginalized in the United States, the figure’s unseen face allows the artwork to become a universal image of exhaustion and despair. Keller was a white artist and activist with connections to many artists whose work was centered on social and economic justice issues. In his artwork, he consistently addressed racism, equality, voting rights, and often the oppression of workers or the sick. We can imagine that the subject’s state is the result of existing in a system that is inherently unfair for the poor, for people of color, the disadvantaged, and the marginalized. Through its intimate presentation of a vulnerable body, Keller’s drawing also evokes compassion and the need to reaffirm and uphold human dignity.



Purchase from an Independent Bookstore
Paperback, 349 pages

Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* is the **One Book One Northwestern** reading selection for 2020-21.

Just Mercy follows Stevenson through the beginning of his career as a lawyer devoted to seeking justice for those who have been treated unfairly by the judicial system. Stevenson's book has prompted a national reckoning with how racism and poverty have so often marred American society.

One Book One Northwestern is a community-wide reading program hosted by the Office of the President. It aims to engage the campus in a common conversation centered on a carefully chosen, thought-provoking book. It began in 2005 for students in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and has since evolved into a community-wide program involving students, faculty and staff from all majors and departments.

Everyone is encouraged to read the One Book selection. The Office of the President sends a free copy to incoming first-year and transfer students the summer before they arrive on campus.

Throughout the year, events like lectures, films, and discussion groups provide an opportunity for individuals to gather and talk about the issues presented in the book. Many of these events are open to the public and the entire community is invited to participate. [Visit the Participate section](#) to learn how you can get involved.

About the Author

Bryan Stevenson is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. Mr. Stevenson is a widely acclaimed public interest lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned.



Photo by Nina Subin/Courtesy of Random House

Under his leadership, EJI has won major legal challenges eliminating excessive and unfair sentencing, exonerating innocent death row prisoners, confronting abuse of the incarcerated and the mentally ill, and aiding children prosecuted as adults. Mr. Stevenson and his staff have won reversals, relief or release from prison for over 135 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row and won relief for hundreds of others wrongly convicted or unfairly sentenced.

Mr. Stevenson has argued and won multiple cases at the U.S. Supreme Court, including a 2019 ruling protecting condemned prisoners who suffer from dementia and a landmark 2012 ruling that banned mandatory life-without-parole sentences for all children 17 or younger. Mr. Stevenson has initiated major new anti-poverty and anti-discrimination efforts that challenge inequality in America.

He led the creation of two highly acclaimed cultural sites which opened in 2018, The Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The new national landmark institutions chronicle the legacy of slavery, lynching and racial segregation and the connection to mass incarceration and contemporary issues of racial bias.

Mr. Stevenson's work has won him numerous awards including over 40 honorary doctorates, the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Prize and the ABA Medal, the American Bar Association's highest honor. He is a graduate of the Harvard Law School and the Harvard School of Government and the author of the award-winning *New York Times* bestseller, *Just Mercy*, which was recently adapted as a major motion picture.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING & LEARNING RESOURCES

Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project: Picturing “The Long Term”

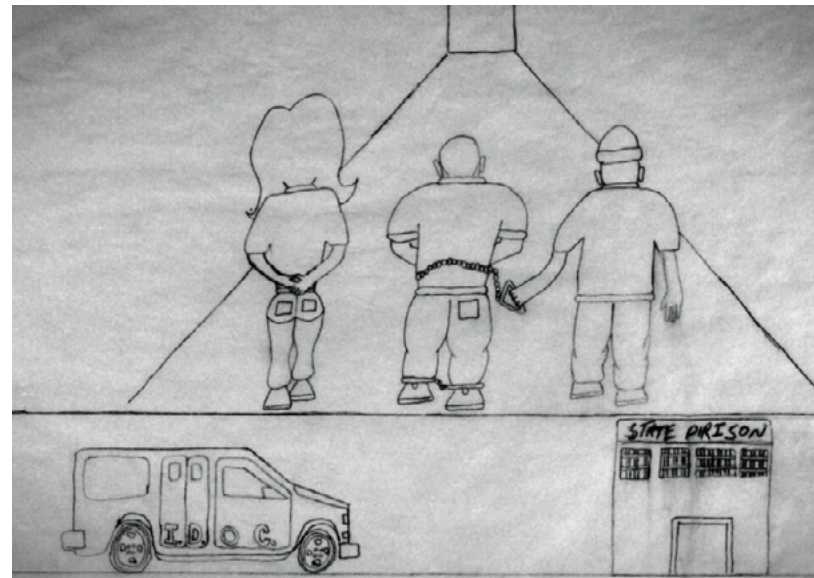
Film Screening and Panel Discussion
(Various Artists, 2018, USA, digital, 13 mins hand-drawn animation)

Since 2011, the **Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project** has brought artists, educators, and activists together with incarcerated individuals at Illinois’s Stateville Correctional Center.

Through classes, workshops, and exhibitions, PNAP creates opportunities for learning across prison walls, connecting those inside with the tools and resources needed to creatively communicate their concerns to the larger Chicago community.

This event highlights one such initiative: **The Long Term (2016-2018)**, a series of works created around the issue of long-term sentencing policies and their impacts. This screening presents moving-image works generated by this project, including *The Long Term* (2018, 13 min), a hand-drawn animated film made by artists serving extended sentences, as well as testimonials from people impacted by long sentences. Following the film, members of the PNAP community discuss the larger scope of the project, the challenges and rewards of arts and humanities education in state prisons, and the urgent need for sentencing reform today.

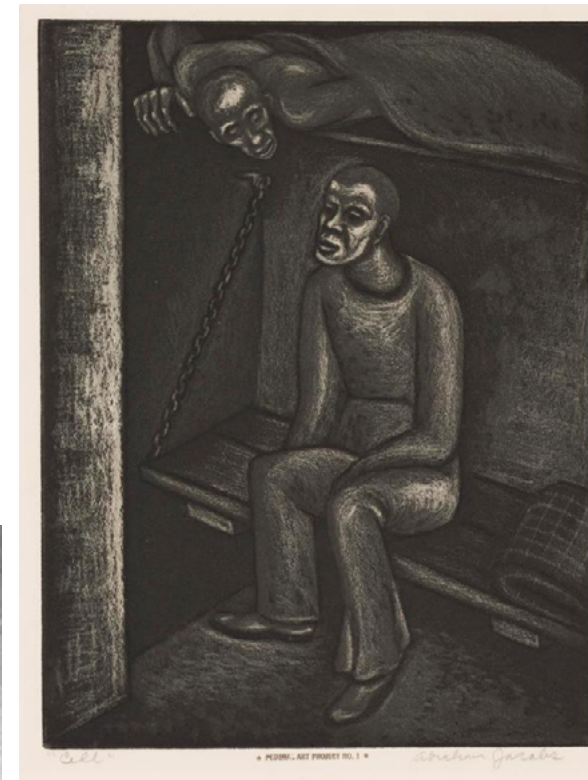
VIEW RECORDING



“The Long Term” [film still], 2018
courtesy of Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project.

Film created by artists from Stateville Correctional Center and artists from the Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project:

Chester Brost, Devon Daniels, Joseph Dole, Francisco “Paco” Estrada, Darrell W. Fair, R Dot Nandez, Damon Locks, C. McLaurin, Flynard “Fly 1” Miller, Andrés Reyes, Sarah Ross., B. R. Shaw, Bring and Johnny Taylor.



Abraham Jacobs (American, 1904 - 1960)

Cell

ca. 1936–42

Aquatint, 23.1 x 17.5 cm

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,
1995.54

Mercy in the Museum: Online Collection Tours

Free and Open to All, Online

Join The Block Museum for a series of shared conversations about artworks from the collection that explore ideas of justice, race, and equity. These online, discussion-based lunchtime tours are led by Block staff and inspired by *Just Mercy*. This series is presented in conjunction with The Block’s 40th anniversary, a year-long celebration of the Museum’s collection as a tool to help us reflect upon, question, and reimagine the past.

- Friday, November 20, 12:00-12:30 PM ([RSVP](#))
- Friday, December 11, 12:00-12:30 PM ([RSVP](#))

Full Calendar of Events

One Book One Northwestern has planned an entire year’s worth of online events to teach, learn and delve into the themes present in Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy*.

Explore the [One Book website](#) to see all the scheduled events during the 2020-21 academic year. You may also access [the print calendar via this PDF](#).

THINKING ABOUT HISTORY with The Block's Collection

OUR 40TH ANNIVERSARY INITIATIVE

This project is presented as part of **THINKING ABOUT HISTORY WITH THE BLOCK COLLECTION**. This year-long initiative marks The Block Museum of Art's 40th anniversary with projects, programs, and events that use the museum's evolving collection as a springboard for thinking about history.

Left Cover Image:

W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918 - 1978)
Untitled (courtroom scene), from the series
Pittsburgh (Detail)
1955/57
Gelatin silver print
Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern
University, gift of Richard L. Sandor, 1993.39

Right Cover Image:

W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918 - 1978)
Untitled (houses from stone wall), from the series
Pittsburgh (Detail)
1955/57
Gelatin silver print
Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern
University, gift of Richard L. Sandor, 1993.41

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