

## Bryan Stevenson's journey to making his life's work the defense of African American prisoners



Richard Roeper, 2020. 'Just Mercy' moving and inspiring even as it follows a formula, Chicago Sun Times. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/1/8/21051885/just-mercy-review-movie-jamie-foxx-michael-b-jordan-bryan-stevenson-innocence-exoneration-lawyer>

By: Jaci Hernandez

Date: February 23, 2023

### JUST MERCY

By Destin Daniel Cretton

[Legal drama, Adventure, and Drama - 4.9 stars - 2h 16m]

A scene that stood out to me while watching this film was the conversation with Herbert Richardson. He talked with Bryan Stevenson after having a set date for his execution. On his last day he asked Stevenson to pray with him and asked if it was okay to send his army flag to him. I thought this was a very special moment between the two and it showed how much of a

connection Stevenson had with each of his clients. He fought for them and made them feel genuinely cared about. To some, he was their only hope especially being on death row. This represented the goal of the book and film very well in my opinion. It shows the effects of death row in each individual inmate, and shows the fight and connection that is created to get off of that list. Richardson explained that Stevenson was the only person that believed and fought for him, and he became a special person in his life since he did not any family to turn to in his situation.

Herbert Richardson was a Vietnam War veteran who was convicted of killing an 11-year-old girl with a pipe bomb and put on death row. After multiple appeals were denied, he was prompted to seek out the assistance of attorney Bryan Stevenson one month before having to face the electric chair. Stevenson filed a stay of execution on his client's behalf, but it was rejected. Before being executed Richardson refused to have a last meal, and requested to be blindfolded as he was led to the chamber. In a final statement, Richardson said, "I have no ill feeling and hold nothing against anyone," The Times reported.

I believe this case being mentioned in the film brings the watcher back to reality. Many cases featured in "Just Mercy" have relatively happy endings. For example, Walter McMillian and Anthony Ray Hinton's story's. These cases did not end in death, and they were lucky enough to escape the electric chair. Having a case that does not have a happy ending reminds us that yes there were some victories, but even with Stevenson's strong efforts to keep as many people off of death row, a few were not as lucky as others. People still died because of our unjust system.

The film Just Mercy emphasizes the importance of active resistance to unfair institutions. Bryan Stevenson in his book describes the racism, corruption, and cruelty that pervade American

court systems and lead to the systematic abuse of marginalized communities. Our system needs to improve a great amount and fast. This film highlights Bryan Stevenson's main ideas from his book. Sometimes the film version of the book can veer off and make their own version of the story but Destin Daniel Cretton did an amazing job on keeping the film focused on Bryan's message. It highlighted system power, oppression, and dehumanization in the justice system. One message that Bryan gave that I appreciated was that everyone is capable of making mistakes, but at one time or another, everyone will need to be granted mercy. Stevenson giving and receiving unexpected and undeserved mercy is the only way to break the escalating cycles of violence, punishment, and hatred that characterize the criminal justice system.

## Just Mercy

Director: Destin Daniel Cretton

Writers: Bryan Stevenson

Stars: Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, Brie Larson, Tim Blake Nelson, and Rob Morgan

Rating: 4.9 Stars

Running Time: 2h 16m

Genres: Legal Drama, Adventure, and Drama