

A Message from the Author

My grandmother was the daughter of people who were enslaved in Caroline County, Virginia. She was born in the 1880s, her parents in the 1840s, and the legacy of slavery very much shaped her and the things she would say to me. When I visited my grandmother, she would hug me so tightly I could barely breathe. After a little while, she would ask me, “Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?” If I said yes, she’d let me be; if I said no, she would assault me again. I said no a lot because it made me happy to be wrapped in her formidable arms. She never tired of pulling me to her. “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close,” she told me all the time.

This book is about getting closer to mass incarceration and extreme punishment in America. It is about how easily we condemn people in this country and the injustice we create when we allow fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. It’s also about a dramatic period in our recent history, a period that continues to mark the lives of millions of Americans—of all races, ages, and sexes—and the American psyche as a whole. The prison population in America has grown from 300,000 in 1972 to 2.3 million people today. The United States now has the highest incarceration rate in the world. We have condemned thousands of children, some as young as 13, to die in prison with life imprisonment without parole sentences. We’ve executed over 1,400 people with a death penalty system that has proved remarkably unreliable. Over 150 people condemned to execution have been proved innocent, exonerated and released.

In 1983, I was a 23-year-old student at Harvard Law School working in Georgia on an internship, eager and inexperienced, and worried that I was in over my head. When I learned that I would be visiting a death row prisoner alone, with no lawyer accompanying me, I tried not to let my panic show. When I signed up for this internship, I hadn’t given much thought to the fact that I would actually be meeting condemned prisoners. To be honest, I didn’t even know if I wanted to be a lawyer. The distance I experienced in my first year of law school made me feel lost. I could not have known that proximity to the condemned, to people unfairly judged, would guide me back to something that felt like home. I document my journey and some remarkable people I represented, including an innocent man named Walter McMillian who was wrongly convicted and sentenced to death in Monroeville, Alabama, the home of Harper Lee’s fictional novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In this book, you will learn the story of Walter’s case, which taught me about our system’s disturbing indifference to inaccurate or unreliable verdicts, our comfort with bias, and our tolerance of unfair prosecutions and convictions. Walter’s experience taught me the ways our system traumatizes and victimizes people when we exercise our power to convict and condemn irresponsibly—not just the accused but also their families, their communities, and even the victims of crime. But Walter’s case also taught me something else: that there is light within this darkness.

My work 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*. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. I believe it’s necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and—perhaps—we all need some measure of unmerited grace.

—Bryan Stevenson



Penguin
Random House
ACADEMIC RESOURCES

www.randomhouseacademic.com

www.commonreads.com

www.randomhouse.com/highschool

rhacademic@randomhouse.com

Please Turn
Over for Book
Description