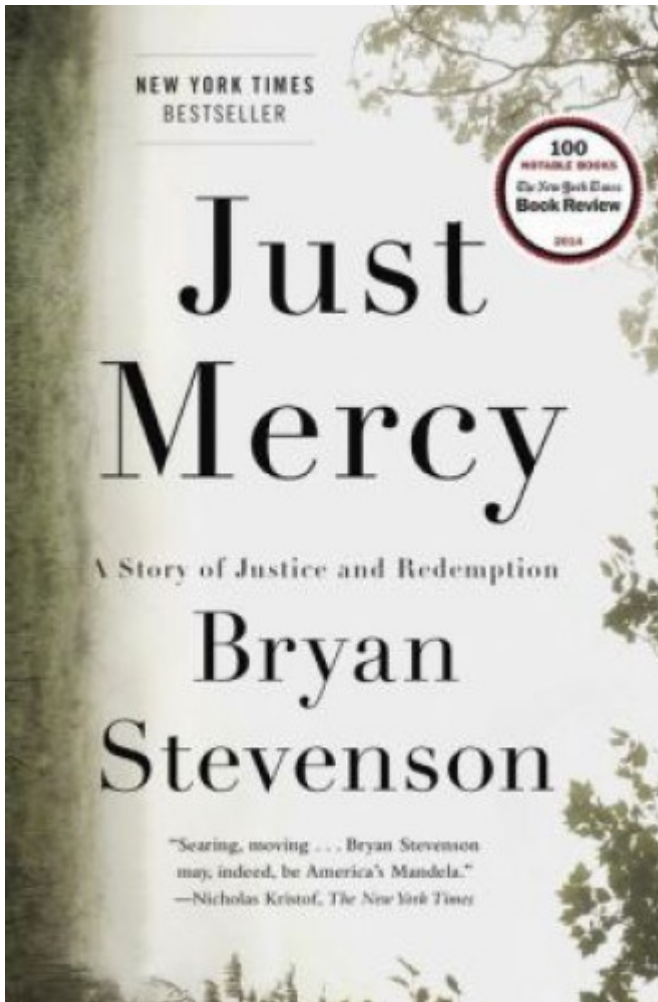


Tennessee: poster child for a broken system

by [Emilie M. Townes](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue

## In Review



## Just Mercy

by Bryan Stevenson  
Spiegel and Grau

I wish the elected officials in Tennessee would read Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Stevenson’s legal practice, the Equal Justice Initiative, is dedicated to defending the poor, the innocent, the inadequately defended,

children, domestic abuse survivors, and the mentally ill who are imprisoned in our grossly unfair national criminal justice system.

The state of Tennessee is the poster child for a largely broken system: gangs have taken hold in urban and rural areas, drugs—particularly methamphetamines—plague our state, we have a horrendously high rate of domestic violence, and 46 percent of prisoners end up back in prison within three years of release. Tennessee now locks up more people than Australia (a country with four times the population), at a cost of more than \$1 billion each year. When a commission devoted solely to sentencing reform was dissolved in 1995, our state began a more than two decades-long slide into a patchwork of criminal laws with varying penalties that trend toward harsher punishments which are proving to be ineffective. *Just Mercy* reveals the tragic consequences of unfair punishment in a justice system oriented mainly toward punishing offenders rather than meeting the needs of victims, offenders, and the community.

A master storyteller, Stevenson makes a compelling case for the power of restorative justice. He tells the story of his work in the 1980s and 1990s with death row prisoners, especially those who have been wrongly condemned and unjustly treated by the legal system. Prisoners like Walter McMillan, falsely accused of murder, are no longer blotter sheet fodder but brought into our lives as someone who survived false conviction and sentencing, blatant racist treatment, and eventual release. Stevenson weaves in other cases with McMillan's to show that his case was not and is not an anomaly.

*Read all of the responses to "A book I'd like my elected officials to read" [here](#).*