

# Amnesty International Group 22 Pasadena/Caltech News

Volume XXIV Number 8, August 2016

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Tuesday, September 13, 7:30 PM.** *Letter writing meeting* at Caltech Athenaeum, corner of Hill and California in Pasadena. In the summer we meet outdoors at the "Rath al Fresco," on the lawn behind the building. This informal gathering is a great way for newcomers to get acquainted with Amnesty.

**Sunday, September 18, 6:30 PM.** *Rights Readers Human Rights Book Discussion group.* This month we read "**Just Mercy**" by **Bryan Stevenson**.

**Thursday, September 22, 7:30 PM.** Monthly Meeting. We meet at the Caltech Y, Tyson House, 505 S. Wilson Ave., Pasadena. (This is just south of the corner with San Pasqual. Signs will be posted.) We will be planning our activities for the coming months. Please join us! Refreshments provided.

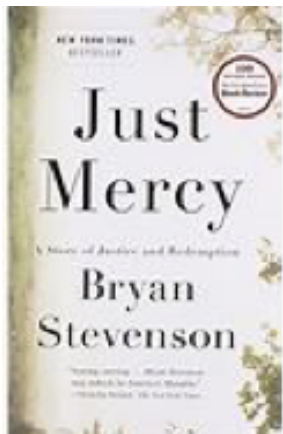
## COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Hi everyone

Hope everyone has had a good summer (although it's not over yet!). We're back from the "Grand Tour" and back to the workday grind! I have a new position working with the Visually Impaired program at a site in Silverlake.

Please note we start our monthly meetings again in September after taking a summer hiatus. Come ready to work on actions for our POC Narges and others!

Con Cariño, Kathy



**Next Rights Readers meeting:**

**Sunday, Sept. 18  
6:30 PM**

**Vroman's Bookstore  
(upstairs)  
695 E. Colorado Blvd  
Pasadena**

***Just Mercy*  
by Bryan Stevenson**

## REVIEW

The New York Times Sunday Book Review  
By TED CONOVER OCT. 17, 2014  
"**Just Mercy**" by **Bryan Stevenson**



The electric chair at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y., in 1953. Credit Associated Press

Unfairness in the Justice system is a major theme of our age. DNA analysis exposes false convictions, it seems, on a weekly basis. The predominance of racial minorities in jails and prisons suggests systemic bias. Sentencing guidelines born of the war on drugs look increasingly draconian. Studies cast doubt on the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. Even the states that still kill people appear to have forgotten how; lately executions have been botched to horrific effect.

This news reaches citizens in articles and television spots about mistreated individuals. But "**Just Mercy**," a memoir, aggregates and personalizes the struggle against injustice in the story of one activist lawyer.

Bryan Stevenson grew up poor in Delaware. His great-grandparents had been slaves in Virginia. His grandfather was murdered in a Philadelphia housing project when Stevenson was a teenager. Stevenson attended Eastern College (now Eastern University), a Christian institution outside Philadelphia, and then Harvard Law School. Afterward he began representing poor clients in the South, first in Georgia and then in Alabama, where he was a co-founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

"**Just Mercy**" focuses mainly on that work, and those clients. Its narrative backbone is the story of Walter McMillian, whom Stevenson began representing in the late 1980s when he was on death row for killing a young white woman in Monroeville, Ala., the hometown of Harper Lee.

Monroeville has long promoted its connection to "To Kill a Mockingbird," which is about a black man falsely accused of the rape of a white woman. As Stevenson writes, "Sentimentality about Lee's story grew even as the harder truths of the book took no root." Walter McMillian had never heard of the book, and had scarcely been in trouble with the law. He had, however, been having an affair with a white woman, and Stevenson makes a persuasive case that it made McMillian, who cut timber for a living, vulnerable to prosecution.

McMillian's ordeal is a good subject for Stevenson, first of all because it was so outrageous. The reader quickly comes to root for McMillian as authorities gin up a case against him, ignore the many eyewitnesses who were with him at a church fund-raiser at his home when the murder took place, and send him — before trial — to death row in the state pen. When the almost entirely white jury returns a sentence of life in prison, the judge, named Robert E. Lee Key, takes it upon himself to convert it to the death penalty.

Stevenson's is not the first telling of this miscarriage of justice: "60 Minutes" did a segment on it, and the journalist Pete Earley wrote a book about the case, "Circumstantial Evidence" (1995). McMillian's release in 1993 made the front page of *The New York Times*. But this book brings new life to the story by placing it in two affecting contexts: Stevenson's life's work and the deep strain of racial injustice in American life. McMillian's was a foundational case for the author, both professionally and personally; the exoneration burnished his reputation. A strength of this account is that instead of the Hollywood moment of people cheering and champagne popping when the court finally frees McMillian, Stevenson admits he was "confused by my suddenly simmering anger." He found himself thinking of how much pain had been visited on McMillian and his family and community, and about others wrongly convicted who hadn't received the death penalty and thus were less likely to attract the attention of activist lawyers.

Stevenson uses McMillian's case to illustrate his commitment both to individual defendants — he remained closely in touch until McMillian's death last year — and to endemic problems in American jurisprudence. The more success Stevenson has fighting his hopeless causes, the more support he attracts. Soon he has won a MacArthur "genius" grant, Sweden's Olof

Palme prize and other awards and distinctions, and is attracting enough federal and foundation support to field a whole staff. By the second half of the book, they are taking on mandatory life sentences for children (now abolished) and broader measures to encourage Americans to recognize the legacy of slavery in today's criminal justice system.

As I read this book I kept thinking of Paul Farmer, the physician who has devoted his life to improving health care for the world's poor, notably Haitians. The men are roughly contemporaries, both have won MacArthur grants, both have a Christian bent and Harvard connections, Stevenson even quotes Farmer — who, it turns out, sits on the board of the Equal Justice Initiative. Farmer's commitment to the poor was captured in Tracy Kidder's "Mountains Beyond Mountains" (and Kidder's advance praise adorns the back cover of "Just Mercy").

A difference, and one that worried me at first, is that Farmer was fortunate enough to have Kidder as his Boswell, relieving him of the awkward task of extolling his own good deeds. Stevenson, writing his own book, walks a tricky line when it comes to showing how good can triumph in the world, without making himself look solely responsible.

Luckily, you don't have to read too long to start cheering for this man. Against tremendous odds, Stevenson has worked to free scores of people from wrongful or excessive punishment, arguing five times before the Supreme Court. And, as it happens, the book extols not his nobility but that of the cause, and reads like a call to action for all that remains to be done.

"Just Mercy" has its quirks, though. Many stories it recounts are more than 30 years old but are retold as though they happened yesterday. Dialogue is reconstituted; scenes are conjured from memory; characters' thoughts are channeled à la true crime writers: McMillian, being driven back to death row, "was feeling something that could only be described as rage. . . 'Loose these chains. Loose these chains.' He couldn't remember when he'd last lost control, but he felt himself falling apart." Stevenson leaves out identifying years, perhaps to avoid the impression that some of this happened long ago. He also has the defense lawyer's reflex of refusing to acknowledge his clients' darker motives. A teenager convicted of a double murder by arson is relieved of agency; a man who placed a bomb on his estranged girlfriend's

porch, inadvertently killing her niece, “had a big heart.”

For a memoir, “Just Mercy” also contains little that is intimate. Who has this man cared deeply about, apart from his mother and his clients among the dispossessed? It’s hard to say. Almost everything we learn about his personal life seems to illustrate the larger struggle for social justice. (An exception: a scene where he is sitting in his car, spending a few minutes alone listening to Sly and the Family Stone on the radio. “In just over three years of law practice I had become one of those people for whom such small events could make a big difference in my joy quotient.”)

But there’s plenty about his worldview. As Stevenson says in a TED talk, “We will ultimately not be judged by our technology, we won’t be judged by our design, we won’t be judged by our intellect and reason. Ultimately, you judge the character of a society . . . by how they treat the poor, the condemned, the incarcerated.” This way of thinking is in line with other pronouncements he makes throughout: “The opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.” They are like phrases from sermons, exhortations to righteous action. “The real question of capital punishment in this country is, Do we deserve to kill?”

The message of this book, hammered home by dramatic examples of one man’s refusal to sit quietly and countenance horror, is that evil can be overcome, a difference can be made. “Just Mercy” will make you upset and it will make you hopeful. The day I finished it, I happened to read in a newspaper that one in 10 people exonerated of crimes in recent years had pleaded guilty at trial. The justice system had them over a log, and copping a plea had been their only hope. Bryan Stevenson has been angry about this for years, and we are all the better for it.

#### AUTHOR BIO



argued five times before the Supreme Court,

BRYAN STEVENSON is the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and a professor of law at New York University School of Law. He has won relief for dozens of condemned prisoners,

and won national acclaim for his work challenging bias against the poor and people of color. He has received numerous awards, including the MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant.

## SECURITY WITH HUMAN RIGHTS

by Robert Adams

*AIUSA released the following press release on July 28, 2016:*

### **Turkey: Intensified crackdown on media increases atmosphere of fear**

As Turkey enters its second week of a three month state of emergency, the ongoing crackdown on civil society and the assault on media freedom has reached disturbing and unprecedented levels, said Amnesty International.

Arrest warrants have been issued for 89 journalists, more than 40 have already been detained and others are in hiding. A second emergency decree passed on 27 July has resulted in the shutdown of 131 media outlets.

“Rounding up journalists and shutting down media houses is the latest assault on a media already weakened by years of government repression. The passing of this second emergency decree leaves little room for doubt that the authorities are intent on silencing criticism without regard to international law,” said Amnesty International’s Deputy Europe Director, Fotis Filipou.

“Even under a state of emergency, restrictions must be necessary, proportionate and for a legitimate purpose. The provisions of the two emergency decrees passed this week fail all three of these tests and fly in the face of the government’s claim that they are upholding rights and the rule of law.”

The second decree follows the first, passed on the July 23, which increased the pre-charge detention period to 30 days. Amnesty International revealed credible reports of widespread ill-treatment and torture of detainees. Lawyers have been denied access to detainees in violation of law.

“The authorities must bring to justice those responsible for unlawful killings and other human rights abuses during the coup attempt.

But this must be done in a manner that respects the right to fair trial, the prohibition of torture and other human rights. The intensified crackdown on freedom of the press does not serve this purpose and is unlawful," said Fotis Filipou.

"We reiterate our call for Turkish authorities to end ill-treatment and torture of those being detained and allow international monitors to visit all detainees in the places they are being held.

## DEATH PENALTY NEWS

By Stevi Carroll

Best news this month: As of this writing (8.17.16), no additional executions in the good old USofA!

### Justice that Works - YES on 62!

I'm still looking for ways for us to become involved in this campaign. I've sent a FB message in which I asked how we can get involved and how to get materials. I'll keep you posted should I get any information. As I know, you will, too. You can also 'like' YES on 62 on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/yeson62/>

For information about YES on 62 (and to donate!), go to <http://yeson62.com/about/>.

### Bryan Stevenson

September's Rights Readers book is "Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption" by Bryan Stevenson. If you don't know anything about him, the New Yorker has an interesting article.

Bryan Stevenson New Yorker August 22, 2016 issue article

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/bryan-stevenson-and-the-legacy-of-lynching>

Consider joining us for the discussion of this book on September 18, 2016, at 6:30 PM at Vroman's, 695 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91101. We usually meet upstairs in the area where authors present. The book is available at Vroman's Will Call, and you can get 20% off by telling the clerk you're buying it for our book group.

### Recent exonerations

Ingmar Guandique - State: DC Date of Exoneration: 7/28/2016

In 2010, Ingmar Guandique was convicted of the abduction and murder of Chandra Levy in Washington, D.C. and sentenced to 60 years in prison. He was exonerated in 2016 after the jailhouse informant who claimed Guandique had confessed admitted his testimony was false. <https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/>

### Stays of execution

August

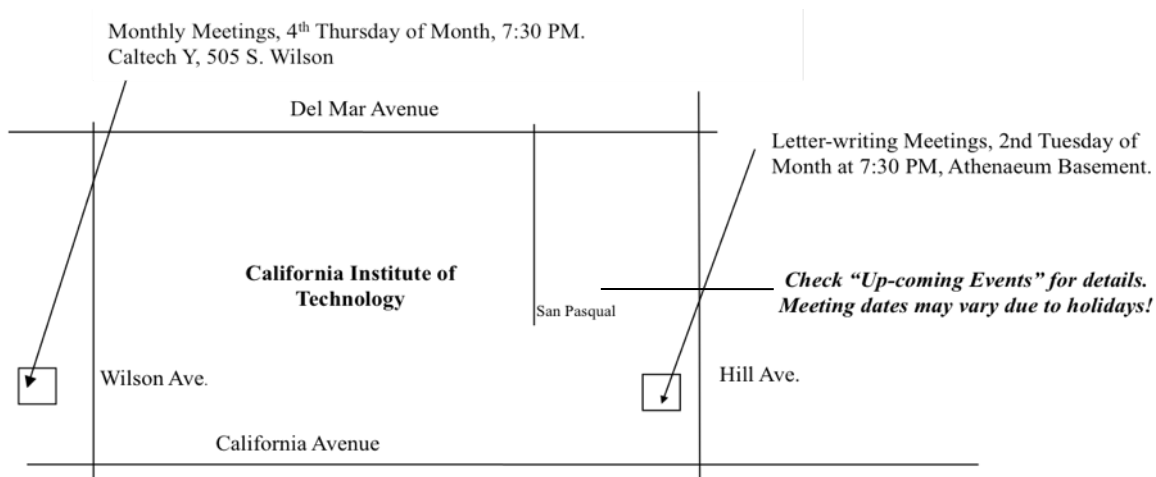
|    |   |    |
|----|---|----|
| 10 | Ramiro Gonzales<br>date rescheduled           | TX |
| 15 | William Montgomery<br>reprieve granted (Ohio) | OH |
| 23 | Robert Pruett<br>stayed                       | TX |

### Executions

NONE since July 15, 2016!

### GROUP 22 AUGUST LETTER COUNT

|   |    |
|---|----|
| UA for POC  | 6  |
| Other UAs   | 17 |
| Total   | 23 |
| To add your letters to the total contact <a href="mailto:aigp22@caltech.edu">aigp22@caltech.edu</a> |    |



From the 210 exit on Lake Avenue, head south, turn left on Del Mar  
 From the 110 continue on Arroyo Parkway north, turn right on California  
 Street parking is generally available.

Amnesty International Group 22  
 The Caltech Y  
 Mail Code C1-128  
 Pasadena, CA 91125  
[www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/](http://www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/)  
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.