

## **Characters in Just Mercy**

*(adapted from LitCharts, from the creators of SparkNotes)*

**Bryan Stevenson** is the author, narrator, and protagonist of the book. He was born in a poor African American community in rural Delaware, attended Harvard Law School, and founded (with his friend Eva Ansley) the Equal Justice Initiative.

**Walter McMillian's** legal case serves as the central storyline of the book. Born to a poor black family outside of Monroeville, Alabama, Walter became a successful small businessman as an adult. He had a large, tight-knit...

**Ralph Myers** is the man whose false accusation sends Walter to death row. Born to a poor, white, Southern family, Myers suffers from trauma-related psychological issues. Considered a low-life in Monroeville, Myers uses fantastical stories to get attention. He abuses drugs with Karen Kelly and is convicted for involvement in the murder of Vickie Pittman. After his accusation against Walter, Myers tries repeatedly to recant his false testimony. Despite threats from the State, he eventually succeeds in recanting the testimony with help from EJI. Though he continues to have mental health issues, Myers ultimately tries to resolve his trauma and make amends for his mistakes.

**Steven Bright** is the director of the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee, an advocacy organization where Stevenson has an internship during law school and then works following his graduation.

**Henry** is the very first inmate Stevenson meets on death row, and their encounter is transformative for Stevenson. Henry is a young black man, about Stevenson's age, who has a wife and kids. Henry is the one who sings when the rough guard takes him away.

As a child, Stevenson is especially close with his **grandmother**, who powerfully influenced his views toward the world and people. In particular, his grandmother is the source of the important advice that, in order to understand something "you have to get close" to it. She was the daughter of slaves from Virginia, and she is described as being very cautious, loving and affectionate.

**Judge Robert E. Lee Key** presides over Walter's original trial. He does not intervene in the State's efforts to select an all-white jury and he collaborates with other state officials to secure Walter's conviction. He later denies their motion for a new trial.

**Minnie McMillian** is Walter McMillian's wife. Like Walter, she is from the poor black community just outside of Monroeville. She is resilient, patient, intelligent and hospitable. She supports and cares for her five children during Walter's incarceration.

**Karen Kelly** is the younger white woman from Monroeville who has an affair with Walter prior to his conviction. The public scandal of their interracial affair defames Walter and infuriates some white residents of Monroeville.

**Ronda Morrison** was the young adult daughter of an influential local white family in Monroeville. On November 1st, 1986, Ronda was found murdered at her workplace, Monroe Cleaners.

**Sheriff Tom Tate** is the sheriff of Monroeville at the time of Ronda's murder. He is the most active participant in police and State efforts to suppress evidence in order to illegally convict Walter.

**Vickie Pittman** was the woman murdered in Escambia County near the time of Ronda Morrison's murder. Born to a poor, white, rural family, Vickie was beloved by her aunts, Onzelle and Mozelle.

**The older man in the wheelchair** - After Stevenson's experience of racial profiling, he gives a speech in a rural Alabama church. The older man in the wheelchair advises him to "keep beating the drum for justice." MLK quote: "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice, say that I was a drum major for peace, I was a drum major for righteousness, and all the other shallow things will not matter."

**Simon Benson** is the ABI Investigator on Walter's case. He works with Sherriff Tate and Larry Ikner to coerce Ralph Myers' testimony and suppress evidence to secure Walter's conviction. When the State finally launches a new investigation into Walter's conviction, Benson is replaced by new ABI investigators who uncover the truth of Walter's innocence.

**J.L. Chestnut and Bruce Boynton** are the attorneys who are hired by Walter's family to defend him during his original trials.

**District Attorney Ted Pearson** is the state prosecutor at the time of Walter's indictment. He cooperates with police to suppress evidence and works with the courts to secure an all-white jury in Walter's case.

**Michael Lindsey** is one of the first men Stevenson represents after founding EJI. Lindsey was given a life sentence by the jury, but it was overridden by a judge who insisted on a death sentence. EJI fails to find relief for Lindsey and Alabama Governor Guy Hunt denies him clemency. He was executed in May 1989.

**Herbert Richardson** - The first execution that Stevenson witnesses is that of Herbert Richardson. Herbert is war veteran with a history of trauma and psychological health problems. He was charged with capital murder and sentenced to death after he unintentionally killed the niece of his ex-girlfriend in a delusional effort to win his ex-girlfriend back. EJI is unable to seek relief for Herbert.

**District Attorney Tom Chapman** replaces Ted Pearson as the District Attorney for Monroe County. Unlike Pearson, he has a history of working as a public defender. He initially defends the State's conviction of Walter McMillian and opposes EJI's efforts. He eventually pursues his own investigation into Walter's case and, following the results, switches his position to support Walter.

**Charlie** is the smart and well-behaved fourteen-year-old boy convicted of murdering his mother's abusive boyfriend, George. He is sent to an adult jail, where he is repeatedly

raped by other inmates. He succeeds in having Charlie's case moved to a juvenile court. Charlie is released years later as a young man.

**Ian Manuel** is a young man from Florida who is convicted of assault and sentenced as a juvenile to life in prison. Because of his age, he is kept in solitary confinement. He develops psychological health issues related to his time in solitary. He forms a friendship with his victim, Ms. Baigre, who becomes his advocate. Ian writes poetry for Bryan.

**Antonio Nuñez** is a young man in California who was sentenced to life in prison as a teenager for a non-homicide crime in which nobody was injured. Antonio's history involves family and neighborhood violence, including the including the shooting death of his older brother.

**Trina Garrett** was a homeless teenage girl in the 1970s when she was convicted of murder. She unintentionally set her friend's house on fire after breaking and entering, and two people died in the fire. Trina came from a household in which her father brutally beat and raped her, her mother, and her siblings. In prison, she was raped by an officer and gave birth to a son, and then became severely emotionally and physically ill with multiple sclerosis. With EJI's support, she later reconnected to estranged family members, including her child, which helped her mental health. At the time of the book's publication, she was still serving a life sentence.

**George Stinney** was a fourteen-year-old African American boy executed in South Carolina in the 1930's. George helped a search party look for two missing white girls and was later falsely arrested for their murders. Decades after George's death, an important white man in the community admitted to killing the girls.

**Mrs. Williams** is a respected elderly woman from the black community in Monroeville. Her presence at Walter's Rule 32 hearing is significant because of her long history of involvement with civil rights battles. She appeared in court despite having to go past guards with dogs.

**George Daniel** is a man who suffered debilitating brain injuries related to a car accident. He is convicted of murder after an altercation with police that led to the death of an officer. George's trial lawyers fail to offer any defense. A charlatan psychiatrist testifies that George has no mental impairment, and George is sentenced to death. EJI later wins relief for George after proving that the "psychiatrist" wasn't a real doctor.

The **unnamed white guard** at the prison where Avery Jenkins is held on death row. Initially, he tries to intimidate Stevenson by drawing attention to the Confederate symbols on his truck and by forcing Stevenson into an unnecessary strip search. As a child of the foster care system, he later identifies with Stevenson's arguments about how Avery's traumatic past impacted him. The guard reforms his behavior, shows kindness to Avery, and quits the prison.

**Marsha Colbey** is the poor white Alabama woman convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison after giving birth to a stillborn baby. The hard-working mother of six other

children, Marsha was unable to afford prenatal care. Marsha becomes an advocate for other women at Tutwiler prison. With EJI's help, she is ultimately released.

**Joe Sullivan** was a thirteen-year-old convicted of rape and sentenced to life in an adult prison in Florida. Joe maintained that he had robbed but not raped his victim. Joe, who had suffered childhood abuse, was raped repeatedly in prison, attempted suicide several times, and developed multiple sclerosis. EJI represents Joe in a case that reaches the Supreme Court. They win the case, which opens the opportunity for Joe's release. Joe becomes attached to Stevenson and often writes him heartfelt letters in a "childlike" tone, suggesting that his trauma has caused intellectual and emotional delays.

**Anthony Ray Hinton** was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in the 1980s. He served over 30 years in solitary confinement. Stevenson describes him as "clearly innocent" due to his alibi and the lack of evidence. EJI eventually secures his release after representing him for 15 years. Mr. Hinton currently works for EJI and has authored the book "The Sun Does Shine."

### **Minor Characters**

**Eva Ansley** is Stevenson's friend and the Operations Director at the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). She helps him to found EJI in 1989, despite struggles with securing space and funding. From EJI's beginning, she manages many financial and logistical setbacks. She is creative and persistent.

**Russell Charley** was a black man and friend of Walter's family. He was lynched in a community near Monroeville following suspicions of an interracial romance. Walter was a child when Russell was killed, and his death had a strong impact on Walter.

**Charlie Bliss** is one of Stevenson's friends from Harvard Law School. Described as a "white kid from North Carolina," Charlie is supportive of Stevenson and shares Stevenson's indignation at the injustices in the world. They become roommates in Atlanta before Stevenson moves to Montgomery.

**Larry Ikner** is the District Attorney Investigator on Walter's case. He works with Sherriff Tate and Simon Benson to force Ralph Myers to testify against Walter. Along with Tate and Benson, he plays a crucial role in suppressing evidence and using bribery to secure Walter's conviction.

**Bill Hooks** is a black man who is bribed to corroborate Myers' testimony against Walter. Sherriff Tate offers to arrange an early release for Hooks if he can testify that he saw Walter's truck at Monroe Cleaners at the time of Ronda's death. Hooks later recants his false testimony.

**Ernest Welch** is a furniture salesman in Monroeville and Ronda Morrison's uncle. He visits Walter's house on business on the morning of Ronda's Morrison's death. However, during Walter's trial, Ernest claims that he visited Walter's home on a different day.

**Russ Canan** is the SPDC lawyer who represented John Evans, a man executed at Holman Prison shortly before Walter's arrival on Holman's death row.

**John Evans** is the man executed at Holman Prison shortly before Walter's arrival on death row. Due to a malfunctioning electric chair, it takes three attempts for officials to finally kill Evans, resulting in a long, painful death.

**Wayne Ritter** is a man who is executed on Holman's death row during Myers' and Walter's time there. Ritter's execution has a profound effect on Myers's unstable mental health. After Ritter's execution, Myers gives into pressure from the state to testify against Walter in exchange for release from death row.

**Joe Hightower** is a white man who is bribed to testify against Walter by corroborating Bill Hook's testimony that Walter's truck was outside Monroe Cleaners on the day of Ronda's death. Prior to the trial, Walter had never seen or met Hightower. Years later, Hightower recants his false testimony.

**David Bagwell** is the volunteer lawyer for Wayne Ritter, the man executed at Holman. After Ritter's death, Bagwell publishes a widely circulated article discouraging attorneys from representing death row inmates and declaring his own support for the death penalty. After Bagwell's article, death row inmates have more trouble securing legal aid.

**Horace Dunkins** is another one of the men Stevenson represents soon after founding EJI. Despite being mentally retarded, Dunkins is denied his late-stage appeals. After his botched execution, his body is autopsied despite protests from his religious family.

**Governor Guy Hunt** was the governor of Alabama from 1987 to 1993. In the book, Hunt denies to stay several executions of EJI clients.

**Darnell Houston** was a co-worker of Bill Hooks. He contacts Stevenson with information that disproves Hook's testimony against Walter. Shortly after, the new District Attorney Tom Chapman retaliates against Darnell by charging him with perjury.

**Mr. and Mrs. Jennings** are a rural white couple who lost their only grandchild to suicide. They reach out to Charlie after hearing his story from Stevenson. They befriend Charlie and his family and offer to give Charlie the money they had saved for their late grandson's college education.

**Chief Judge John Patterson** is the former KKK-backed governor of Alabama, famous for actively opposing the Civil Rights Movement and resisting de-segregation. He serves as Chief Judge of the Appellate Court at the time when Stevenson files a direct appeal on Walter's behalf.

**Michael O'Connor** is Stevenson's first co-counselor in Walter's case. The son of Irish immigrants, he has a rough background and is a recovering heroin addict. Stevenson sees Michael's background as an asset in their work. Michael is humble and shares Stevenson's passion for justice.

Vickie Pittman's twin aunts, **Mozelle and Onzelle** are described as outspoken, straightforward rural white women. They were very close to their niece and angered by her murder. They are very hospitable toward Stevenson.

**Debbie Baigre** is the woman injured by Ian Manuel's crime. While robbing her at gunpoint, Ian pulled a gun and shot Ms. Baigre, damaging her jaw. She later accepted his apology and became his friend and advocate.

**Assistant Attorney General Don Valeska** is known for being tough on crime and harsh on supposed criminals. District Attorney Tom Chapman brings Valeska in to help defend the State's position during Walter's Rule 32 hearing.

**Judge Thomas B. Norton Jr.** presides over Walter's Rule 32 hearing.

**Brenda Lewis** is an African American former police officer who comes to work as EJI's paralegal around the time of Walter's Rule 32 hearing.

**Clay Kast** is Walter's white mechanic. He becomes crucial in Walter's case when he comes forward with records and statements that contradict the testimonies of Bill Hooks and Joe Hightower.

**Avery Jenkins** is an intellectually disabled man who is convicted of murder and sentenced to death. As a child, Jenkins was severely physically abused while moving between several foster homes. EJI wins relief for Jenkins, who is transferred to a mental health facility.

**"Dr. Seger"** is the man who poses as a psychiatrist in the trial of Avery Jenkins. For years, he works as a state psychiatrist, giving illegitimate testimonies regarding the mental condition of defendants like Avery Jenkins.

**Bernard Harcourt** is an attorney who replaces Michael at EJI. He had originally planned for a "traditional legal career," but he became passionate about prison justice after interning with EJI one summer.

**Tom Taylor and Greg Cole** are the new ABI investigators assigned by Chapman to reinvestigate Walter's case. Unlike their predecessors, they aren't affiliated with local law enforcement or state officials in Monroe County. They ultimately assert Walter's innocence and present their findings to the State.

**Judge Pamela Baschab** is the judge who presides over the final hearing in Walter's case, in which EJI motions to have all of the charges against Walter dropped. She cheerfully grants EJI's motion and orders that Walter be released.

**Stevenson's mother** is described as a lifelong church musician. She dies just before Stevenson travels to Sweden to receive the Olof Palme International Human Rights Award.

**Ashley Jones** is a young woman serving a juvenile life sentence for murdering her abusive relatives. She reaches out to EJI to express her support and curiosity about their

work. EJI later takes on her case in an effort to help juveniles sentenced to life for homicide.

**Evan Miller** is another juvenile convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. He was involved in the killing of a middle-aged neighbor who had given drugs to him and his teenaged friends. Stevenson describes Evan as contemplative, remorseful, and capable of change.

**Stevenson's grandfather** - At the age of 86, Stevenson's grandfather was murdered by two teenaged boys who had come to rob him.

**Terrance Graham** is another young man who was sentenced to life in a Florida prison for violating the terms of his probation by attempting a robbery. EJI represents Graham along with Joe Sullivan before the Supreme Court.

**Alan Simpson** is a former Senator from Wyoming. A former juvenile felon himself, Simpson was among the many politicians who supported EJI in fighting against life sentences for non-homicide juvenile offenders.

**Jimmy Dill** is an intellectually disabled man convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Despite their efforts, EJI is unable to seek clemency for Dill. Stevenson's frustration and sadness over Dill's death leads to a crisis of faith for Stevenson that forms the climax of the book.

**The little boy at church** - As a child, Stevenson teased a little boy for his stutter, and Stevenson's mother made him apologize and hug the little boy. The little boy's kindness and forgiveness taught him about the power of undeserved mercy.

**Kuntrell Jackson** is another juvenile offender sentenced to life in prison for homicide. EJI includes him with Evan Miller in their Supreme Court case against life sentences for juvenile homicide cases.

**Joshua Carter and Robert Caston** were juveniles convicted of non-homicide crimes and sentenced to life in prison at Angola prison in Louisiana. As forced laborers, they both became disabled. They become the first people released from prison after EJI's Supreme Court victory over juvenile sentences for non-homicide cases.

**The Old Woman (the "Stonecatcher")** is a mysterious, charming older woman whom Stevenson meets outside the courtroom during the Carter and Caston hearings. She tells Stevenson that, like him, she is a "stonecatcher" who holds others' sadness and fights against injustice. She tells Stevenson he will sing sad songs, like her.

**Woodrow Ikner** is a white police officer who testifies during Walter's trial that he was instructed to lie so as to bolster the prosecutions case.