A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

Upon receiving this book at orientation, I was first reluctant to read it; I judged it solely on the title itself. I thought it was your classic cliché story of redemption: “Man is on the right path, man falls off that path, man reconnects with God, and everything goes according to plan.”

However, that was not the case. I found myself getting intrigued by the book’s first few pages, so much so that I found myself relating to almost every aspect of the book and I hadn’t finished the first chapter, yet.

After the first page of the introduction, I thought to myself, “not bad.” As I advanced further into the book, I realized I was singing along to the hymn in the book; to my knowledge I had never heard the song but I sang it in my head as if I composed it myself. I felt as though I wasn’t reading a book, but, rather Bryan Stevenson’s diary. I wondered what the story would have been like coming from Henry’s perspective. Henry was a death-row prisoner Stevenson met while a law student.

I found myself judging and hating most of the characters in this book, thinking, “How can people be so cruel and evil.” What made it even worse was my hate was fueled by those not of my own race.
From the moment I opened the book to nearly the end, I kept saying to myself, “Why do white people hate us so much, not only us but every minority race in America?”

This book led me to think of the events that had happened in Ferguson, Mo., the rising case of police brutality in America, plus the “Black lives matter” mantra, and how recently people had changed it to “All lives matter.”

When have “all lives mattered in American history?” With so much hate growing in America, it is hard not to point the blame at someone: When every day feels like a witch hunt, except an entire race is the prey, it can be quite difficult not to hate, and more difficult not to blame the haters.

Race is an identity one cannot choose. I believe it is something that is part of you, like your DNA. Much like a child cannot choose who his or her parents are, neither can people choose their race. What baffled me and still baffles me today is that someone can be wrongfully accused of a crime simply because someone doesn’t like his or her skin color, much like what happened to Walter McMillian, a primary “Just Mercy” character. What is even more surprising is that much hasn’t changed since the time of McMillian. It is 2015 and yet some people refuse to see past skin color and are still threatened by someone who looks different or acts different from them.

When I got to the end of the book, I couldn’t help but think of my own experiences growing up. I was 10 when I came to the States and it is here I learned people could hate you simply because of the color of your skin, a practice I have learned is, however much people want to deny it, part of American culture. In Cameroon, where I was born and raised, never in my life had someone been mistreated simply because their skin color, even if they
were white. Racism had never existed in Africa prior to the events in South Africa; colorism yes, but never racism.

My experiences, I realize, have shaped the person I am today. It was easy to relate to many of the characters in “Just Mercy,” especially McMillian; not just because we are the same race, but because of the fact each and every one of us, no matter how small our experiences are or how sad the story is, all have a connection. “Just Mercy” has made me realize we simply cannot judge those who oppress us because of their wrongdoings. To better the world for ourselves and our future generations, we must change the way we treat each other and look past race and more at human compassion.