

Laurie Wolfley

The University of Connecticut

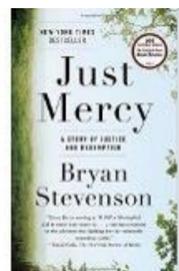
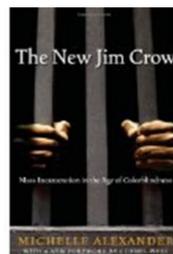
ABSTRACT

UConnReads Meets “One Book, One Region”: Integrating *The New Jim Crow* and *Just Mercy*

Spring 2016 saw several UConn Avery Point professors collaborating to integrate two annual book programs—UConnReads and Southeastern Connecticut’s One Book, One Region—across the campus. Both programs took a months-long look at their chosen text, offering book talks and other programming aimed at creating a discourse community around the books’ topics. Avery Point offered film viewings and discussions on campus, as well as panel presentations open to the campus and greater community. Many courses directly integrated the books into their curriculum, and several students and faculty members attended related community events at libraries and campuses around the state. Even UConn Early College Experience classes (offering UConn courses in the high schools) got in on the act.

THE BOOKS

This year’s UConnReads book choice, *The New Jim Crow*, by civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michelle Alexander, “challenges the idea that race-based discrimination...ended with the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Arguing that the War on Drugs – which began in the 1970s – disproportionately targets men of color and has given rise to a growing ‘racial caste system,’ Alexander calls for a new way of seeing mass incarceration not as a criminal issue but rather as a crisis of racial justice and civil rights.”



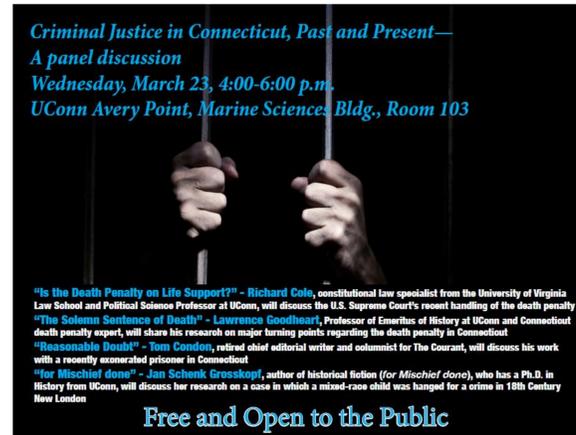
The 2016 One Book, One Region book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson (a gifted lawyer and social justice advocate who founded the Equal Justice Initiative), is “an award-winning account of an idealistic young African-American lawyer’s coming

of age, a look into the lives of those he has defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of true justice.”

Criminal, social and environmental justice became the focus of the semester-long programming.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Criminal Justice in Connecticut, Past and Present



- **“Is the Death Penalty on Life Support?”**—Constitutional law specialist Dr. Richard Cole discussed indications that the death penalty will soon be taken up by the Supreme Court.
- **“The Solemn Sentence of Death”**—Death penalty expert Dr. Lawrence Goodheart discussed major turning points in the 400-year history of the death penalty in Connecticut.
- **“For Mischief Done”**—Author Jan Schenk Grosskopf discussed the background, sources and ethics in her work on a case in which a mixed-race child was hanged for a crime in 18th-century New London, Connecticut.
- **“Reasonable Doubt”**—*Hartford Courant* columnist Tom Condon discussed his 23-year campaign to win a new trial for Richard Lapointe, a mentally handicapped man convicted of a brutal rape and murder in Connecticut. “The system,” argued Condon, “attempted to get a conviction, not to do justice.”



Panelists discuss criminal justice in Connecticut among an audience of UConn Avery Point students, faculty and staff, as well as members of the local community

IN LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Laurie Wolfley, coordinator of American Studies Early College Experience—a program that brings UConn courses to high school classrooms—helped local high schools join in on the collaboration. Thanks to a grant Connecticut College received, Laurie was able to deliver books for each student in three UConn ECE American Studies classes, and she shared parts of her curriculum and even worked with several students in one high school.



Betty Anne Reiter, Director of Groton Public Library and One Book, One Region chairwoman, and Kelley Benzing from Norwich Technical School



Laurie and Mike George, Fisher’s Island School



Avery Point Director Joe Madaus; Colleen Hardison, Marine Science Magnet High School; and Laurie



Ms. Hardison’s class works with the *Just Mercy* text

COLLABORATION SPONSORS

- UConnReads
- One Book, One Region
- The Avery Point Global Café Learning Community
- UConn’s Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning
- The Avery Point Director’s Office
- Connecticut College

IN UCONN AVERY POINT CLASSROOMS

Avery Point’s faculty and staff are committed to engaging students in their communities, and many professors integrated one or both books into their curriculum: Richard Cole, political science; Jamie Kleinman, psychology; Margaret Robinson, history; Nancy Parent, anthropology; Christine Green, biology; Renee Winchester, English; and more.

Laurie Wolfley was tired of reading, grading, and then discarding her students’ work; she wanted her technical writing students’ products to represent more than simply a means to a grade. When she discovered that the UConnReads and One Book, One Region topics were similar—and both were relevant and interesting to her students—she decided to focus her course on bridging the programs and sharing their common message with the campus and beyond. Her students researched controversial topics and created brochures to distribute in the area, posters to present at a community poster session, and in-depth reports to be sent to individuals throughout the area. With an authentic audience, these products held more meaning than they might have in a typical classroom—to both Laurie’s students and the community at large.

AN EMPASSIONED CALL TO ACTION



Just Mercy author **Bryan Stevenson** visited Connecticut College on April 4th and implored young people to change the world by doing four things:

- Commit to going where injustices occur; we can’t solve problems from a distance
- Change the narratives that sustain inequality and injustice
- Protect our hopefulness, as hopelessness is the enemy of justice
- Be willing to do uncomfortable things