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Mercy and Hope

Students in UC Santa Barbara sociology professor Elena Skapoulli-Raymond's "Social Inequalities" class used the book to creatively explore topics of racial inequality in prisons, false confessions and a history of the death penalty.

One student read an original poem. Another showed a clip of rapper Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry" performance at this year's Grammy Awards. A trio of students shared a diorama with cutouts of shadowy figures and barbed wire (i.e., tinsel), but also lots of green leaves and vines, "representing mercy and hope."

The book is Bryan Stevenson's award-winning "Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption." The UCSB Reads selection for 2016, it has generated wide-ranging discussions on campus well in advance of author-attorney Stevenson's visit to UCSB Monday, April 18, when he will discuss the book and the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization he founded to offer support to defendants and prisoners who have confronted injustice in the U.S. legal system.

Stevenson's talk, which will begin at 8 p.m. in Campbell Hall and is free and open to the public, will wrap up nearly four months of UCSB Reads activities. Now in its 10th anniversary year, UCSB Reads brings the campus and local community together for a common reading experience. The program is led by the UCSB Library and supported by the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor and other campus and community partners, with the book selected by a panel of faculty, students, staff, and community representatives.

“‘Just Mercy’ has inspired the campus and Santa Barbara community to contribute to the timely dialogue in our nation about racial injustice,” said University Librarian Denise Stephens. “The Library is proud in this 10th anniversary year of UCSB Reads to provide a forum for academics, students, community representatives, local officials and Santa Barbara residents to read, to share expertise, to listen, and to engage in significant conversations inside and outside of the classroom.”

Activities for UCSB Reads 2016 have included a roundtable discussion with local law enforcement about community policing, a panel on activism and social change, a screening of the documentary “White Like Me: Race, Racism & White Privilege in America,” and four public library panels featuring UCSB faculty and local organizers.

During the winter and spring quarters, 13 UCSB courses featured “Just Mercy” as part of the coursework. The UCSB Library provided 1,043 free copies of the book to students in these courses, and the chancellor distributed thousands of free books to students during a giveaway in January.

A combination of memoir and reporting, “Just Mercy” chronicles Stevenson’s own life as well as the stories of defendants he has helped, most notably Walter McMillian, a prisoner on death row whom he helped exonerate. The book has earned Stevenson numerous honors and awards, including the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, Dayton Literary Peace Prize and a NAACP Image Award. Time magazine named the book one of the top 10 nonfiction titles of 2014. In addition, actor Michael B. Jordan is set to portray Stevenson in a film adaption.

Stevenson, who grew up poor in a racially segregated neighborhood in Delaware, has represented capital defendants and death row prisoners since 1985, argued six cases before the Supreme Court, and won a ruling on behalf of juveniles in the justice system.

He is a graduate of Harvard Law School, and in addition to his work as executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative he is a professor at the New York University School of Law.

Stevenson’s talk is co-sponsored by UCSB Arts & Lectures. More information about the talk and UCSB Reads 2016 can be found at http://guides.library.ucsb.edu/content.php?pid=215982&sid=1796567. Questions regarding the talk can be directed to UCSB Arts & Lectures at (805) 893-2080. Questions about UCSB Reads can be directed to Rebecca Metzger at

rmetzger@ucsb.edu or (805) 893-2674.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.