



# Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

## Born a Crime

Stories from a South African Childhood

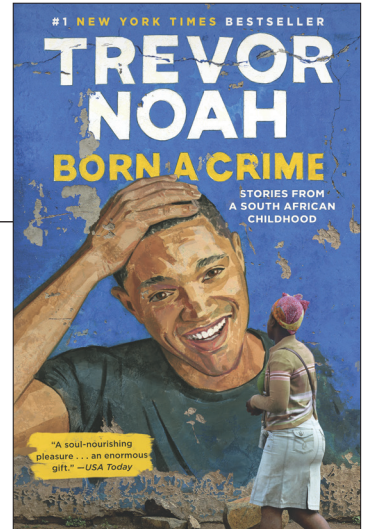
by Trevor Noah

A #1 *New York Times* Bestseller  
Named One of the Best Books of  
the Year by *The New York Times*  
• *Newsday* • *Esquire* • NPR  
• *Booklist*

Winner of the *Thurber Prize*  
for *American Humor*

Spiegel & Grau | HC | 978-0-399-58817-4 | 304pp. | \$28.00

Also available as an E-Book



"[A] compelling new memoir . . . By turns alarming, sad and funny, [Trevor Noah's] book provides a harrowing look, through the prism of Mr. Noah's family, at life in South Africa under apartheid. . . *Born a Crime* is not just an unnerving account of growing up in South Africa under apartheid, but a love letter to the author's remarkable mother." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

[Noah's] electrifying memoir sparkles with funny stories . . . and his candid and compassionate essays deepen our perception of the complexities of race, gender, and class." —*Booklist* (starred review)

### • about the book •

Trevor Noah's unlikely path from apartheid South Africa to the desk of *The Daily Show* began with a criminal act: his birth. Trevor was born to a white Swiss father and a black Xhosa mother at a time when such a union was punishable by five years in prison. Living proof of his parents' indiscretion, Trevor was kept mostly indoors for the earliest years of his life, bound by the extreme and often absurd measures his mother took to hide him from a government that could, at any moment, steal him away. Finally liberated by the end of South Africa's tyrannical white rule, Trevor and his mother set forth on a grand adventure, living openly and freely and embracing the opportunities won by a centuries-long struggle.

*Born a Crime* is the story of a mischievous young boy who grows into a restless young man as he struggles to find himself in a world where he was never supposed to exist. It is also the story of that young man's relationship with his fearless, rebellious, and fervently religious mother—his teammate, a woman determined to save her son from the cycle of poverty, violence, and abuse that would ultimately threaten her own life.

The stories collected here are by turns hilarious, dramatic, and deeply affecting. Whether subsisting on caterpillars for dinner during hard times, being thrown from a moving car during an attempted kidnapping, or just trying to survive the life-and-death pitfalls of dating in high school, Trevor illuminates his curious world with an incisive wit and unflinching honesty. His stories weave together to form a moving and searingly funny portrait of a boy making his way through a damaged world in a dangerous time, armed only with a keen sense of humor and a mother's unconventional, unconditional love.

## — about the author

Trevor Noah recently made his debut as the new host of the Emmy® and Peabody® Award–winning *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central. Noah joined *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2014 as a contributor. He continues to tour all over the world and has performed in front of sold out crowds at the Hammersmith Apollo in London and the Sydney Opera House in Australia as well as many U.S. cities. He is originally from South Africa.

## — guided reading and discussion questions

1. Trevor Noah opens *Born a Crime* with the Immorality Act of 1927, which banned sexual intercourse between unmarried white people and black people. What was your initial response to this passage? Did you know anything about the history of apartheid in South Africa prior to reading this book? As the son of a Xhosa mother and a Swiss-German father, how did Trevor have to navigate South African society? How did Trevor’s mother overcome or subvert the geographical boundaries put in place by the apartheid system? How did her relationship with Trevor’s father help her to cross these boundaries? Trevor’s birth was evidence of an illegal act under South African law at the time. How might your own upbringing have been, and still be, different if your identity and existence were not recognized as legal or moral?
2. Trevor describes employing different languages to bridge cultural differences, but he also explains how, under apartheid, the coexistence of multiple languages promoted division and oppression. How did Trevor and his mother use language to cross legal and social boundaries and navigate challenging situations? What role does language play in the creation and sharing of culture? How can language create both barriers and a sense of unity? Can you think of an example from your own life of a time when language acted as a barrier to working with others?
3. Throughout the book, Trevor’s mother remains dedicated to practicing her religion and attending church, despite the danger of doing so, given the frequency of violence and rioting in the streets. Why did Trevor’s mother continue to take him to church despite the significant and potentially deadly obstacles? Can you think of a present-day example of people taking risks in order to practice their religion? Can you think of a time that your own religious or moral beliefs were challenged? How has that experience shaped your beliefs today?
4. Why did Trevor’s mother decide to throw him from a moving minibus? Trevor writes, “I just knew what to do. It was animal instinct, learned in a world where violence was always lurking and waiting to erupt.” How do you think Trevor was affected and influenced by the prevalent violence and explicit racism that he witnessed throughout his childhood? What are some examples of how the lives of children and families are impacted by oppression and violence today, either in the United States or in other countries?
5. Why did Trevor’s mother choose to stay in South Africa rather than live in exile in a European country? What sacrifices did she have to make as a black woman living in a predominantly white neighborhood, apart from Trevor’s father? Why was Trevor surprised by his mother’s choice to stay in South Africa? Have you or members of your family ever had to flee home because of violence or oppression? If yes, how has this affected and shaped you? Trevor describes Soweto, the neighborhood in which he grew up, as having an aspirational quality. How was Soweto built? Why does Trevor describe Soweto’s driveways as a metaphor for hope?
6. Throughout the book, Trevor’s mother uses humor to cope with difficult and often painful challenges. When does this approach support Trevor, and when does it challenge or frustrate him? What role does humor play in Trevor’s upbringing? How did that role affect his career choices? Have you ever used humor to help manage a challenging situation?
7. Trevor’s skin color affected his upbringing in many ways, including how he was or was not disciplined. Why did Trevor’s grandmother refuse to discipline him? How did Trevor escape identification as one of the culprits in a robbery caught on tape? Can you think of a situation or time when your own race played a role in how you were or were not punished for something you did or did not do?

8. Why does Trevor describe his upbringing as similar to being raised as a white person? How was he taught to use language as a way to camouflage difference? How does Trevor's mother encourage him to think about the ghetto? Why do Trevor's neighbors question and challenge the way his mother educates him? Why does Trevor describe the neighborhood in which he grew up as "a state of suspended animation"?
9. Why are people, particularly white people, outraged by the incident at the soccer match? How do you think people of different cultures and in different locations perceive this incident? Why is Trevor surprised by this outraged response? Why do you think videos of black people being beaten to death by white people in South Africa do not provoke the same public outcry? How did apartheid teach people to treat other people based on their race? How do you see this dynamic play out in your own country or community today?
10. Why do you think Trevor struggles with his discovery that Fufi the dog loves another family? Trevor writes, "That experience shaped what I've felt about relationships for the rest of my life: You do not own the thing that you love." What was your reaction to this statement? What have you learned about love and heartbreak from your own relationships?
11. What happens at home after Trevor is bullied at the mulberry bush? Why does Trevor's mother try to discourage him from discussing the incident with Abel? Do you think Trevor is right to tell Abel about the incident anyway? What does Trevor discover about Abel and about bullying? What do you think Trevor should have done?
12. How does Trevor's ability to speak multiple languages, and his experience of being biracial, help him adjust to different social situations? How is he able to shift his self-presentation in different racial and socioeconomic groups? Trevor writes of his experience selling snacks to different groups of people, "I was everywhere with everybody, and at the same time I was all by myself." How does Trevor's sense of identity affect how he builds relationships with other people? Have you ever attempted to blend in to a new situation or group? Did you struggle to gain acceptance, or did you find it easy to adapt?
13. How did receiving computer equipment from a white friend impact Trevor's music business? How does this influence his understanding about the need to "empower the dispossessed and the disenfranchised in the wake of oppression"? What are other examples of privileged people sharing resources or access to empower people in need? Can you think of a time in your own life when you empowered someone else to succeed or an experience of feeling empowered because someone else helped you?
14. How does a lack of education about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism contribute to a disagreement at the Jewish school event? Why does Trevor believe that the teacher's reactions are racist? What do you think could have prevented this disagreement? How do you think you would have reacted if you had witnessed this misunderstanding? Would you have responded? Why or why not?
15. Trevor writes, "In society, we do horrible things to one another because we don't see the person it affects. We don't see their face. We don't see them as people." How does Trevor react when he sees the family pictures on the digital camera he stole? Trevor describes racial segregation as a way to distance and dehumanize others. Can you think of other social situations in which we distance and dehumanize others? Can the presence of individual faces and stories change how we think about people who are different than us?
16. What was your reaction to Trevor's interactions in jail with the man he calls "the Hulk"? When he is moved to another holding cell, how does Trevor choose which racial group to join? Have you ever been in a situation where you have had to choose a group based on an aspect of your identity? Was it easy or challenging to make this choice? How do culture and identity create a sense of belonging while also contributing to social divisions?
17. Why do the police refuse to charge Abel with any crimes when Trevor's mother reports him for abuse? How do the police treat Trevor's mother? Were you surprised to read about this kind of response to domestic violence? Why or why not? How does Trevor's mother explain Abel's acts of violence? Do you think the lack of support from law enforcement influences her decision to seek financial independence from Abel?

18. Trevor writes that his relationship with Abel was full of both love and hate. How were Trevor and his mother able to forget about Abel's beatings, and move on? Were you surprised by their ability to do this? Why do you think women are often blamed for staying in violent relationships, rather than offered the support and resources they need to leave their abusers? How do you think we might better support children and families impacted by domestic violence?
19. Why does Trevor's mother refer to the effects of growing up poor and black as "the black tax"? Why is Trevor afraid to hand over his credit card in the emergency room to pay for his mother's medical care? Have you ever been expected or encouraged to do something differently than your parents or grandparents, such as go to college or get a certain type of job? How have your family's decisions over the years influenced or led to your individual choices today?
20. What were your reactions to Abel's assault on Trevor's mother? How did the police's reactions to previous incidents of domestic violence contribute to the charge of attempted murder against Abel and the resulting sentence? How do you think the legal system should have responded in this case? How does Trevor's mother connect this incident to her religious faith?

## — about this guide's writer

**RACHAEL HUDAK** is the author of several discussion guides, including *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond. She currently serves as the director of the Prison Education Program at New York University. She has led hundreds of workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, and New York, and has worked on anti-violence initiatives throughout the United States. Rachael holds an Executive MPA from New York University and a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan.



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