



## 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*

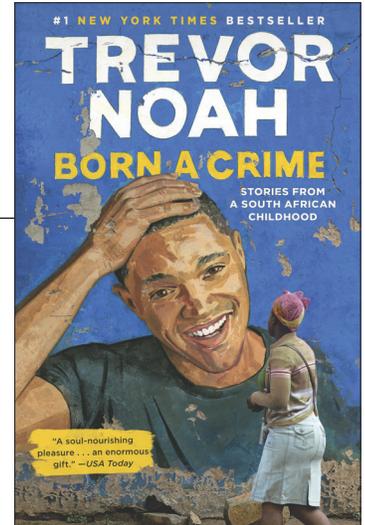
- *Newsday* • *Esquire* • NPR
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Winner of the *Thurber Prize*  
for *American Humor*

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**Reading Level: 6**



"[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.

## — note to teachers

Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* is a funny, honest collection that details the popular comedian's coming of age in South Africa as apartheid ended. The son of a black mother and a white father, Noah regularly had to acclimate to a variety of fraught situations, forcing him to think critically about race and the country's legacy of racism and colonialism. Throughout these experiences, Noah remained anchored by his mother, Patricia, whose aspirations for her son guaranteed that he would be able to rise above his meager beginnings. Ultimately, Noah's text is a thoughtful account of what it means to forge one's complex identity in a country that is grappling with its own attempts to come to terms with its legacy of injustice. *Born A Crime* is an important update and addendum to classic literary texts about apartheid, offering a relatable, contemporary perspective to readers.

Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading informational text for high school curriculums, *Born a Crime* is an appropriate selection for grades 11 and 12 in Language Arts or World History classes. At the college level, the book is appropriate for composition and literature classes, race studies, gender studies, and global studies, and it is also ideal for first-year/common reading programs.

In the section of this guide titled "Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards," the prompts provide for a critical analysis of *Born a Crime* using the CCSS for Informational Text and for History for grades 11 and 12, and they are organized according to the standard they primarily support. In addition, at the end of each standard and the corresponding prompts, a classroom activity is provided that will enhance analysis of the text.

For a complete listing of the Standards, go to: [corestandards.org/the-standards](http://corestandards.org/the-standards).

## — pre-reading activities

Reading *Born a Crime* will be a richer and more meaningful experience for students if they first have an understanding of South Africa's system of apartheid and its historic legacy. Students should devote some time to exploring resources that detail this history, and the role of South Africa's National Party in the apartheid system, as this will enhance their overall understanding. Most importantly, centering Nelson Mandela's importance in South Africa—particularly his role in ending apartheid—is key to having a rich context for the book. Additionally, understanding how race and racism function in South Africa is important for readers, as this knowledge will shed light on how people were placed into racial categories (an act that, as Noah describes, could be arbitrary) and then treated based on their category. It is also essential that readers understand how "coloreds" were discriminated against both during the apartheid era and during the various post-apartheid leaderships transitions, as this discrimination helps clarify the broader relevance of Noah's story. Finally, having your readers analyze the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides a powerful framework for grappling with the devastating impact of apartheid.

Teachers can help students consider the stereotypes they might have about Africa and the origin of those stereotypes. After establishing ground rules for respectful dialogue, asking students to respond to prompts and pictures culled from the media is a constructive starting point for critical thinking about the origin of these perceptions and the problems that

accompany stereotypes, leading to a strengths-based perspective of thinking about Africa. During this discussion, you may also wish to show the graphic “How Big is Africa?” to ensure that students understand that Africa is a large and diverse continent and not a single country. Additionally, examining maps of South Africa, its provinces, and major cities will help students have a basis for locating the places to which Noah refers. Teachers can also show Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” and lead students in a discussion about how stereotypes of all kinds are limiting. Finally, providing students with information about colonialism and its effects on Africa will further build their background knowledge.

Noah describes apartheid as “institutionalized racism.” It is important to foreground this concept, so students can then begin to evaluate its legacy. Students also might want to compare aspects of apartheid to systems of enslavement in the Americas. Thus, providing resources that help students to draw on evidence and make arguments will strengthen those comparisons (please consult the Resources section at the end of this guide for materials that can assist those conversations).

Under apartheid, interracial marriage was illegal. Noah begins his book with the Immorality Act of 1927. A close reading of the language of the Act invites an analysis of the severity of the law and helps students understand the risks Noah’s parents took simply in giving birth to Noah.

Finally, Noah is the host of the popular *Daily Show*. After previewing an episode to judge appropriateness for students, teachers might choose to view clips to provide students with a dose of Noah’s humor. Additionally, watching excerpts or all of the documentary about Noah, *You Laugh But It’s True*, offers another resource for considering Noah’s experiences growing up in South Africa.

*Born a Crime* is ordered into sections that lend themselves to pre-reading and smaller units of study. Teachers might select one or two chapters to acquaint students with Noah’s voice, ideas, and themes. The book’s short chapters are ideal for close reading and mentor texts, and as prompts for students to do their own writing.

## — examining content using common core state standards

### key ideas and details

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

*Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.*

How was Noah’s upbringing complicated by living in a “police state,” particularly as a colored child? What did he learn about apartheid, about how police treated whites as opposed to how they treated coloreds and other nonwhite people, and about the risk his parents took simply by having a child together? What specific examples from the text are most important to understanding his explanation of this aspect of his childhood—that is, growing up colored in the apartheid-era police state?

Noah describes languages in South Africa as a hierarchy, where “English comprehension is equated with intelligence” (p. 54). He explains: “I learned to use language like my mother did . . . It became a tool that served me my whole life” (p. 55). He even asserts that “language, even more than color, defines who you are to people” (p. 56). Do you agree with Noah’s assessment of the importance of language? What do his claims suggest about the power of language and the values placed on certain languages over others?

Despite his primary school teacher’s recommendation that he remain in the advanced, white-dominated classes, Noah opts to take lower-level classes with black students instead. He writes,

“With the black kids, I wasn’t constantly trying to be. With the black kids, I just was” (p. 59). What does this suggest about identity and belonging, especially in light of Noah’s interracial identity?

List all of the different neighborhoods in which Noah lived and their respective characteristics. In his own estimation, what were the advantages and disadvantages of each place? How did each location shape his identity? What does this suggest about the influence and importance of being grounded in a particular place and time (that is, why did it matter that he was a young colored boy in a white neighborhood during the post-apartheid era?) What lessons did he have to learn, growing up in that time and place?

Noah’s mother insists that he have a relationship with his father: “‘Because he’s a piece of you,’ she said, ‘and if you don’t find him you won’t find yourself’” (p. 101). Explore the importance of Noah’s decision to forge a relationship with his father, Robert. Focus on the moment when Robert shows him the scrapbook of Noah’s accomplishments, and then compare that to Noah’s assertion that “Being chosen is the greatest gift you can give to another human being” (p. 110).

What conclusions can you draw about what Noah learned from his friend Andrew? What was the value of what Noah learned outside of school, as compared to in school? Interpret Noah’s conclusion that “Working with Andrew was the first time in my life I realized you need someone from the privileged world to come to you and say, ‘Okay, here’s what you need, and here’s how it works’” (p. 190).

Noah is dismayed when his stepfather, Abel, begins abusing him and his mother. Noah also learns a hard lesson about how South African society viewed female domestic violence victims when he saw how the local police discredited his mother’s claims of abuse. Eventually, his mother leaves Abel after he nearly kills her. Discuss how you think this part of his life affected Noah’s future, particularly given his mother’s wishes for him to live a life better than her own. How did this experience of abuse shape him and his relationship with his mother?

Note all the ways in which Noah participated in the underground economy of Alexandra, from pirating music to selling CDs and DJing parties. How do his detailed descriptions of his time in Alexandra complicate your assumptions about crime and poverty? Consider Noah’s explanation: “The hood made me realize that crime succeeds because crime does the one thing the government doesn’t do: crime cares. Crime is grassroots. Crime looks for the young kids who need support and a lifting hand. Crime offers internship programs and summer jobs and opportunities for advancement. Crime gets involved in the community. Crime doesn’t discriminate” (p. 209). Do you agree with Noah’s opinion of crime as described here?

## — classroom activity

“My mother showed me what was possible,” Noah writes (p. 73). Noah’s mother offers him advice and lessons throughout his life. Collect these lessons and pieces of advice from throughout the book and evaluate them. Which ones seemed to benefit Noah most? Which ones did not? Collectively, what does his mother’s advice help the reader understand about their relationship? How did this advice impact his identity and sense of self?

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

*Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.*

Trace two or more of the following themes throughout the book, noting examples of where they appear in the text: masculinity, love, religion, role models, tradition, identity, education, discrimination, social class. Analyze each theme on its own, and then compare it to another

theme, drawing on evidence from the text. Conclude what these themes suggest for Trevor’s development.

Noah prides himself on his ability to fit into a variety of situations and forge friendships with different groups of young people: “Ever the outsider, I created my own strange little world” (p. 139). He continues, “Since I belonged to no group I learned to move seamlessly between groups. I was a chameleon, still, a cultural chameleon” (p. 140). Before he decides to leave Alexandra, Noah realizes that, “Bongani and the other East Bank guys, because of where they were from, what they looked like—they just had very little hope . . . in the back of my mind I knew I had other options. I could leave. They couldn’t” (p. 224). Later, when he is in a prison holding cell, he concludes that “racism exists, and you have to pick a side. You can say that you don’t pick sides, but eventually life will force you to pick a side” (p. 240). Assess all the moments throughout the book where Noah acts like a chameleon, noting the benefits and costs of that ability to adapt to a number of situations.

Noah has an epiphany when, about to sell a stolen digital camera, he looks at the pictures on it and has second thoughts. He reflects, “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. Which was the whole reason the hood was built in the first place, to keep the victims of apartheid out of sight and out of mind. Because if white people ever saw black people as human, they would see that slavery is unconscionable. We live in a world where we don’t see the ramification of what we do to others, because we don’t live with them” (pp. 221–22). What does this reflection suggest about the nature of guilt and how it influenced Noah’s development and maturation? More broadly, what do his words suggest about the legacy of racism for South Africans?

## — classroom activity

Noah explains his background as follows: “My mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, is black. My father, Robert, is white. . . . During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race. Needless to say, my parents committed that crime” (p. 21). Examine the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, as well as its amendment in 1968 and repeal in 1986. Then conduct a Socratic seminar to discuss why such legislation existed and its impact on Noah’s upbringing.

## — craft and structure

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

*Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.*

Evaluate Noah’s use of humor to explain various instances in his life throughout the book. Discuss the overall impact of using humor, focusing on how humor enabled him to make friends and to get out of difficult situations. In this discussion, pinpoint certain words and phrases Noah uses to support the analysis of the use of humor.

New sections of the book begin with explanatory material ranging from historical documents to broader social and political commentaries about South Africa. Consider the function of these aspects of the book and then decide how this structure either supports or detracts from the work as a whole.

Noah’s memoirs begin with a story about his mother. These stories weave themselves throughout the book, concluding with a final story about her. Evaluate why he anchors the book with their relationship and the impact of this decision.

## classroom activity

Noah provides a rich description of Alexandra, one that encourages considering the city from an assets-based perspective. Using pages 204–206, create a visual representation of Alexandra as he describes, supporting your decisions with textual evidence. Then, explain how Noah’s description of the city helps to understand the importance of the place on his identity and of the other South Africans who live there. Find supporting resources about Alexandra and apply them to understanding more about the city and its residents.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6

*Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence.*

Black families who were relocated in order to create white-only settlements struggled to survive and thrive. Noah states, “So many black families spend all of their time trying to fix the problems of the past. That is the curse of being black and poor, and it is a curse that follows you from generation to generation. My mother calls it the ‘black tax.’ Because the generations who came before you have been pillaged, rather than being free to use your skills and education to move forward, you lose everything just trying to bring everyone behind you back up to zero” (p. 66). Spend some time researching the movement of races in South Africa post-apartheid, including which resettlements were voluntary and which were forced by the government. Where do Noah’s accounts resonate with other historical versions of these events, and where do his accounts diverge from them? How and why do you think these relocations impacted racial equality and upward mobility?

The men in Noah’s life included his father, Robert, and his stepfather, Abel. Noah also had a peer group of young men throughout his adolescence. Compare these relationships, noting the impact of each on Noah, particularly as related to models of masculinity. What did Noah learn from each of them? What are the challenges and benefits of each of these relationships for Noah?

Noah compares the teaching of the Holocaust to German students to the teaching of apartheid to South African students. He recalls: “In South Africa, the atrocities of apartheid have never been taught that way. We weren’t taught judgment or shame. . . . Facts, but not many, and never the emotional or moral dimension” (p. 185). Given his assertion, how does *Born a Crime* complicate how apartheid history might be taught, and why that history should include narratives like Noah’s? What does his account suggest about how historical memory is preserved for some groups and not for others? What does his story suggest about the importance of including an emotional or moral dimension in these historical accounts?

## classroom activity

Research how the South African government determined whiteness, including the Pencil Test (see link in the Resources section at the end of this guide). Read other accounts of how race was determined in apartheid-era South Africa. What similarities and differences exist in these accounts? Then make an argument about how measures such as the Pencil Test either prove or disprove Trevor’s statement that “You were what the government said you were,” particularly for those who were multiracial (p. 119). What is the significance of these often arbitrary measures on people’s attempts to have agency over themselves and for the country’s broader goals of equality? What do the measures that governments take to prevent races from mixing suggest about race and racism? As an extension of this activity, consider how early census-takers in the United States implemented similar practices for determining race and how the policies derived from these practices impacted Americans.

## • integration of knowledge and ideas

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

*Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.*

Noah argues for a complete understanding of the atrocities and the legacies of apartheid in South Africa. When describing Alexandra, he compares it to the “slums in Mumbai or the favelas in Brazil” (p. 202). Review Jay Smooth’s video that explains institutionalized racism (see the Resources section at the end of this guide). Then, assess how institutionalized racism has affected Alexandra and other places in South Africa and what that racism suggests about the impact of upward mobility and the possibility of equality for black South Africans.

## • classroom activity

Hip-hop has been called a global movement for its ability to act as a platform for young people’s agency and to allow them to articulate their concerns. Noah describes how he used hip-hop to broker his entry into peer groups and events, and as a source of income. Select lyrics from a few global hip-hop artists and conduct a critical analysis of the lyrics. Additionally, draw on research from hip-hop scholars. Then present your findings in a three-column chart that notes similarities and differences in the text of the lyrics. Finally, present your own argument about hip-hop’s impact on global youth culture.

## • resources

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Apartheid Museum. [apartheidmuseum.org](http://apartheidmuseum.org)

“How Big is Africa?” [bu.edu/africa/outreach/curriculum/curriculum-guide](http://bu.edu/africa/outreach/curriculum/curriculum-guide)

“Mixed Marriages Act.” South End Museum. [tiny.cc/southendmuseum](http://tiny.cc/southendmuseum)

Nelson Mandela Foundation. [nelsonmandela.org](http://nelsonmandela.org)

“Racial Classification Under Apartheid.” [thoughtco.com/racial-classification-under-apartheid-43430](http://thoughtco.com/racial-classification-under-apartheid-43430)

“What is Systemic Racism?” Race Forward video series. [raceforward.org/videos/systemic-racism](http://raceforward.org/videos/systemic-racism)

“A Short History of of Coloured People in South Africa.” [v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/hands-on-classroom/classroom/pages/projects/grade12/lesson1/coloured-history.htm](http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/hands-on-classroom/classroom/pages/projects/grade12/lesson1/coloured-history.htm)

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## • other works of interest

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## — about this guide's writer

**DR. KIMBERLY N. PARKER** currently teaches English at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Cambridge, MA. She is the former president of the New England Association of Teachers of English and the former Secondary Representative at-large for the National Council of Teachers of English. Dr. Parker holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



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