

BORN A CRIME: STORIES FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDHOOD

Trevor Noah, One World Random House | ISBN 9781531865030

Reviewed by **EITAN DARWISH**

TREVOR NOAH'S LIFE STORY TELLS THE STORY OF SOUTH AFRICA

Today, Trevor Noah is one of the most recognizable faces in America. As the Host of the daily show, he wittingly speaks truth to power and makes us laugh in the process. In *Born a Crime*, Noah outlines what formed the man we know today: A mixed racial identity in a highly racialized setting, a strong mother, and a healthy skepticism of Jesus,

I listened to the audiobook version of *Born a Crime*, which I strongly recommend. Incredible at impersonations and thoughtful about the format, Noah himself narrates the story of his life and transports you into Soweto, where you can see firsthand how South African society functions, and how Trevor had to navigate his word, which so often was defined by the color of his skin.

BORN A CRIME

Trevor Noah's mother was black and his father was white. In South Africa, it was illegal for a white person and a black person to have a child together and the time of Noah's birth, hence the book's title.

Noah was thus unable to be in public with either parent: he was *Colored*, or mixed-race, while neither of his parents were. Though Noah tells the story with great comedy and enthusiasm, we see chilling moments where the rules of apartheid broke apart Noah's family, like when he was in the park with his father, and after yelling "Daddy!" his dad literally ran away from him. Trevor was so young he thought it was a game. His mom couldn't be seen with Trevor either, so she went on walks in the park with her Colored friend so that the public would think that Trevor was with a

Colored mother. For Trevor, the family unit was only the beginning of the divisions he would experience.

(NOT) FITTING INTO A TRIBE

"Tribalism" is a loaded term that us Americans often use haphazardly, but in South Africa there is literal meaning to the societal divisions that took root.

Whether in the schoolyard or in a jail cell, Trevor's status as Colored meant that he had to choose a group to congregate with – when Trevor arrived somewhere, people were already divided into their racial subcategories, often white, black, Indian, and Colored. For a while, he tried to avoid making a decision by simply being someone outside the norm, mingling between groups, joking around, but not assembling with a core group of friends.

Eventually, when arriving at a new prep school, Trevor chose black. Raised by a black mother, and with an entirely black Xhosa family Trevor felt an allegiance to black South Africans. However, when Trevor arrived in jail for driving a car with false plates, he chose white out of pragmatism.

In addition to divisions along color lines, South African society was also linguistically divided based on ancestral tribe. The two largest tribes are Xhosa and Zulu.

THE POLYOLOT

Though he was a Xhosa and spoke the language, Trevor Zulu, Afrikaans, English, and a few other tribal languages completely fluently, which allowed a large swath of the South African population to feel comfortable talking to him. While growing up, The only unfortunate gap in the

polyglot's repertoire was not speaking the language of his date to the all-important high school matriculation dance.

Speaking several languages and living in a space of constant limbo, Trevor became adept at appealing to multiple groups and spotting the hypocrisy of tribalism firsthand.

I appreciated this perspective – I think language is a very important part of the politics of nation-states. As a son of Israeli immigrants who's minoring in Arabic, I can definitely say that language is helpful when speaking across political lines. In my travels to the Middle East, my Arabic has been invaluable as a legitimizer. For me, though, I had the privilege of choosing to learn a language because I wanted to travel to foreign countries. For Trevor Noah, learning multiple languages was part of how he survived a life of poverty in Soweto

MATERNAL DRIVE, BREAKING THE VICIOUS CYCLE

Trevor's mother Patricia was determined to break the vicious cycle of black oppression in South Africa. This began with finding a way to get a job in a township in which she was legally restricted to live, and somehow becoming a typist, which was uncommon for women, and even less so for a black person. She was a black woman. In a radical act of defiance against the apartheid state, Patricia's quest to break the cycle continued with her having a child with a white man.

Patricia was so driven to break this cycle that she even threw Trevor out of a moving van when she had reason to suspect the driver was going to kidnap and kill them – Trevor agreed with the decision. It was this extent of maternal drive that preserved Trevor's life in the perilous streets of the city.

JESUS

If you asked Patricia how she was able to save Trevor with the van incident, or if you asked her why she thinks Trevor has reached his current

level of success, her top reason would probably be Jesus.

A highly devout Christian, Patricia would take Trevor and his brothers to three different churches as often as she could. It is in Trevor's altercations with his mother about religion that I first linked Trevor's current job to his childhood: He would question the logic of a power figure. Today it is politicians and big business, but back then it was his mother. On a rainy Sunday morning when the car breaks down, Patricia might say "Jesus is testing us today - we will walk to church through the rain." Trevor might respond, "what if Jesus is telling us *not* to go to church, first with the rain, and then with the car?" In these funny exchanges one can begin to see the Trevor we know and love today.

THE POVERTY AND VIOLENCE OF THE CITY LED TO TREVOR'S ARREST, AND NEARLY LEFT HIS MOTHER DEAD

Without money to seek higher education and with a police force clamping down on his DJ gigs, Trevor turned to life as an informal pawn broker, flipping items for profit. This left Trevor in a moral limbo; he would make a living, but often by selling goods he knew were stolen. Eventually, Trevor was caught driving an unregistered car by police on his way to swap some items. The inside of a jail terrified Trevor, and he realized how easy it would be to fall in and out of jail and forget about building a future. I am mesmerized at how Noah was able to reach the pinnacle of American comedy given his background. If he was one in a million, what opportunities were available to the 999,999 South African children like him? How can South African children born into poverty today expect to find a way out?

Patricia found a way to get Trevor out, but she was unable to escape violence. Her estranged husband, whom she reported for domestic violence several times, shot her in the back of the head. How does South Africa approach domestic violence today?