

Born a Crime

by Trevor Noah · Language: EN

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Overview

Born a Crime is Trevor Noah's memoir about growing up in South Africa during the final years of apartheid and its aftermath. The title refers to the fact that his very existence was illegal: his father was white and his mother was Black, a union criminalized under apartheid law. Noah weaves together vivid stories of his childhood, from his mischievous exploits to his struggles with identity, poverty, and violence, all while highlighting the resilience and fierce love of his mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah.

The book is structured as a series of interconnected vignettes rather than a linear narrative, each chapter focusing on a key episode or theme. Through these stories, Noah explores how language, race, and class intersected in South Africa, and how his mother's unconventional parenting shaped his worldview. The narrative arc moves from his early years in a world where he had to hide his existence, to his adolescence navigating the transition to a democratic South Africa, and finally to his early adulthood as he begins to find his voice in comedy.

Born a Crime matters because it offers a deeply personal and often humorous perspective on a brutal historical period, making complex social and political issues accessible through storytelling. It is also a universal story about the bond between a mother and son, the search for belonging, and the power of humor as a survival tool. The book has been widely praised for its honesty, wit, and emotional depth, and it has introduced millions of readers to the realities of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa through the eyes of a child who lived it.

Key Takeaways

- Language can be a powerful tool for survival and connection; Trevor used multiple languages to navigate different racial and social groups in South Africa.
- A mother's fierce love and unconventional parenting can provide a child with the resilience to overcome systemic oppression and personal hardship.
- Humor and storytelling are effective coping mechanisms for dealing with trauma, poverty, and injustice.
- Identity is often complex and fluid, especially in a society that tries to categorize people by race; Trevor's mixed-race heritage forced him to carve his own path.
- Poverty and violence are not just personal failings but are often rooted in systemic and historical forces like apartheid.

- Education and critical thinking are invaluable tools for breaking cycles of poverty and challenging authority.
- The transition from apartheid to democracy did not automatically erase racism or inequality; it changed the rules but not the underlying attitudes.
- Finding your voice and your own path often requires breaking away from societal expectations and even from family patterns.

Chapter Summaries

Run

Trevor opens with a story from his childhood where he is thrown from a moving car by his mother to escape a violent pursuer. This incident illustrates his mother's extreme measures to protect him and sets the tone for the book's themes of danger and survival. He explains that his birth was a crime under apartheid, and his mother's decision to have him was an act of defiance.

Born a Crime

Trevor explains the legal and social context of his birth: the Immorality Act made sexual relations between whites and Blacks illegal. His parents, a white Swiss father and a Black Xhosa mother, risked imprisonment to be together. He describes his father's quiet, absent presence and his mother's dominant role in his life, and how his existence was a secret that had to be hidden.

Trevor, Pray

Trevor recounts his early childhood living with his mother, grandmother, and extended family in Soweto and later in Eden Park. He describes his grandmother's strict religious household and his own mischievous nature. A key story involves him accidentally setting the house on fire while playing with matches, and his mother's calm response, which taught him about consequences and her trust in God.

Chameleon

Trevor explores how his mixed-race identity made him a 'chameleon' who could move between different racial groups by switching languages and behaviors. He was too Black for white kids, too white for Black kids, but he learned to adapt. This chapter highlights the absurdity of racial categories and how language became his key to survival and acceptance.

The Second Girl

Trevor describes his mother's abusive relationship with Abel, a violent and jealous man who would become his stepfather. He also reveals that his mother had a daughter, his half-sister, from a previous relationship, a fact he learned later. The chapter shows the complexity of his mother's choices and the cycle of abuse that affected their family.

Loopholes

Trevor discusses his childhood as a 'mixed' kid in a Black township, where he was often seen as privileged but also faced resentment. He learns to use his language skills and charm to navigate tricky situations, like when he gets caught stealing at a local shop. He also reflects on the role of the church in his life and his mother's deep faith.

Fufi

Trevor tells the story of his dog, Fufi, who was a stray that he and his mother adopted. Fufi becomes a beloved companion, but when the dog is poisoned, Trevor experiences his first deep loss. This chapter is a poignant look at childhood grief and the lessons his mother taught him about death and resilience.

Go Hitler!

Trevor recounts a school incident where he was punished for making a Hitler joke during a Nazi-themed school play. He explains how, in his community, Hitler was seen as a figure who hated whites, not Jews, and was therefore not a taboo subject. The story illustrates the bizarre ways that history and racism were understood in his world, and how his mother's response taught him about the power of words and context.

The Cheese Boys

Trevor describes his teenage years in a multiracial neighborhood called Highlands North, where he formed a crew of friends from different backgrounds. They engaged in petty crime and mischief, including stealing cheese from a local store. This chapter shows his transition into adolescence and the complexities of friendship and loyalty across racial lines.

The World Doesn't Love You

Trevor reflects on his mother's strict parenting style, which was designed to prepare him for a world that would not love him because of his race. He tells the story of when his mother threw him into a car and drove away, leaving him to walk home, as a lesson in self-reliance. This chapter is a powerful exploration of tough love and the harsh realities of growing up Black in South Africa.

My Mother's Life

Trevor details his mother's own difficult upbringing, including her abusive father and her determination to escape poverty through education and faith. He describes her decision to have him out of wedlock as an act of rebellion against her family and society. This chapter provides crucial context for understanding her fierce independence and her sacrifices for her children.

The Final Chapter

Trevor describes the climax of his mother's story: Abel, in a fit of rage, shoots her in the head and body. Miraculously, she survives, and Trevor rushes to the hospital to see her. He reflects on the trauma of that event and his mother's unshakeable faith, which she credits for her survival. The book ends with Trevor and his mother sharing a moment of gratitude and humor, underscoring the resilience that defines their relationship.

Themes

- Mother-son bond
- Racial identity
- Apartheid and post-apartheid
- Humor as survival
- Language and power
- Poverty and resilience

Notable Quotes

- "The book is a love letter to my mother, and a thank you to her for giving me the tools to survive." — Trevor Noah has said this in interviews about the book, though it is not a direct quote from the text itself. It is included here as a common paraphrase of the book's dedication.
- "I was born a crime. I was born to a white woman and a Black man, and in South Africa, that was a crime." — This is a paraphrase of the book's opening lines, which state: 'I was born a crime. I was born to a white woman and a Black man, and in South Africa, that was a crime.'
- "My mother was my first and best teacher. She taught me to think for myself, to question everything, and to never be afraid of the world." — This is a paraphrase of Trevor's reflections on his mother's influence throughout the book.
- "I was a chameleon. I could be whatever I needed to be to survive." — This is a paraphrase of the chapter 'Chameleon,' where Trevor describes his ability to adapt to different racial groups.
- "The world doesn't love you. If the police stop you, you don't say a word. You do exactly what they say." — This is a paraphrase of his mother's advice to him, which is a central theme in the chapter 'The World Doesn't Love You.'

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Born a Crime about?

Born a Crime is Trevor Noah's memoir about growing up in South Africa during and after apartheid. It focuses on his childhood as the mixed-race son of a white father and Black mother,

which was illegal at the time. The book is a series of humorous and poignant stories about his family, his struggles with identity, and his mother's fierce love.

Is Born a Crime worth reading?

Yes, it is widely considered one of the best memoirs of recent years. It offers a unique perspective on apartheid through the eyes of a child, blending humor with heartbreak. The writing is engaging and accessible, and the relationship between Trevor and his mother is deeply moving. It is both entertaining and educational.

How does Born a Crime end?

Spoiler: The book ends with Trevor's mother being shot in the head by his abusive stepfather, Abel. She survives, and Trevor rushes to the hospital. The final scenes show Trevor and his mother sharing a moment of gratitude and humor, reflecting on her survival and their unbreakable bond. It's a powerful and emotional conclusion.

Who should read Born a Crime?

Anyone interested in memoirs, South African history, or stories about overcoming adversity. It appeals to a broad audience because of its humor and universal themes of family, identity, and resilience. It's also a great pick for book clubs, as it sparks discussion about race, privilege, and parenting.

How long does it take to read Born a Crime?

The book is about 288 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 6-7 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few days, as the engaging narrative makes it hard to put down.