Born a Crime

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TREVOR NOAH

Born to a Xhosa mother and a Swiss-German father in Johannesburg, Trevor Noah's very existence as a mixed-race person was technically illegal until the end of South Africa's white supremacist apartheid regime in 1994. *Born a Crime* covers his life until the beginning of his career in the early 2000s, following his close relationship with his beloved mother, his attempts to articulate his complex identity in a nation that still clung tightly to racial hierarchy, and his struggle to overcome the poverty and violence that surrounded him. After he finished high school, humor transformed from a means of coping with suffering to the foundation of his career: after a year DJing and selling CDs in the Johannesburg suburbs, he gained a substantial following in South Africa by hosting a youth radio show called *Noah's Ark* and doing stand-up comedy. He hosted a number of major South African television shows and became one of the nation's most prominent comedians before moving to the United States, where he was completely unknown, in 2011. By 2014, he landed a recurring role on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, then took over the hosting role in 2015, which propelled him to international fame. He currently lives in New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The earliest years of Trevor Noah's life were also some of the most consequential years in the history of South African history because they saw the erosion and ultimate defeat of the nation's racist apartheid regime, which was then replaced with a democracy led by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. In order to understand why the end of apartheid was so significant, it is crucial to understand the broader history of European colonialism and racism in South Africa, which largely begins with the establishment of a Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope in the 17th century. Dutch settlers took South African natives as slaves and mixed with the native Khoisan population, creating a distinctive mixed-race population known today as the Cape Coloureds, as well as fighting a number of wars against the Xhosa. Around the turn of the 19th century, the British took over the Cape of Good Hope and began forcing the Dutch settlers (also known as Afrikaners or Boers) to move inland and form the Boer Republics. The British then fought and won wars against both the Zulu and the Boers before uniting with the latter in the early 20th century to impose increasingly repressive laws on the native population. The most notable was the 1913 Natives' Land Act, which effectively made it illegal for blacks to own land. South Africa officially gained independence from the UK in 1931, but the Afrikaner-led National Party won the 1948 elections, closely studied government-enforced racial segregation policies around the world, and implemented the most effective to create the system of laws and governance known as *apartheid*. The population was divided into four groups: whites, Indians, coloreds, and blacks. Unlike with racism in countries like the US, there was no illusion of anything like "separate but equal"; rather, the apartheid government openly proclaimed an ideology of white supremacy. Apartheid guaranteed the white minority most of the nation's land, wealth, and political power; gave coloreds and Indians limited political rights; and forced native black Africans to labor in what was effectively a form of slavery and to live in cramped slums (townships) and depleted rural areas (homelands or bantustans). Apartheid also created separate zones for each group to live in and prohibited intermarriage among people from the different groups. Of course, as Trevor Noah's very existence proves (and he argues repeatedly in *Born a Crime*), these racial classifications were messy and changeable in practice, because race is a construct rather than a set of clear biological categories. As domestic and international opposition to apartheid grew from the 1950s through the 1980s the South African government became increasingly violent and repressive, slaughtered and imprisoned thousands of dissidents, and even developed nuclear weapons. In conjunction with international sanctions against the South African government, the internal anti-apartheid movement led by organizations including the African National Congress (ANC) campaigned for equality through both nonviolent methods (protest and civil disobedience) and armed resistance. Secret negotiations between the apartheid government and anti-apartheid leaders began in 1987, and the National Party began dismantling the apartheid system and legalizing opposition parties in 1990, when it also released prominent ANC leader Nelson Mandela from jail. When apartheid fully ended and South Africa had democratic elections for the first time in 1994, when Noah was 10 years old, Mandela won the presidency (and the ANC has held power ever since). An essential feature of the post-apartheid healing process was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a body convened to judge human rights abuses committed during apartheid. Unlike most legal measures taken in the aftermath of atrocities, the TRC focused on restorative rather than retributive justice and offered amnesty to some offenders who openly admitted their crimes. After apartheid, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal countries, with income inequality and black unemployment actually increasing, roughly half the nation continuing to live in poverty, and the tiny white minority (now less than 10%) still owning a large majority of the land and over 90% of wealth. While some of the

ANC's social and economic empowerment programs have seen limited success, the majority have failed, especially due to enduring corruption and connections between the government and business interests.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the last few decades, a monumental amount of ink has been spilled by writers and activists from across South Africa's political and ethnic spectrums trying to come to terms with apartheid's legacy and the difficulties of transition to democracy. Without a doubt, the most famous book that grapples with these topics is Nelson Mandela's classic prison autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. More journalistic accounts include Allister Sparks' history of the political negotiations leading to apartheid's end, *Tomorrow is Another Country*, as well as *Country of My Skull*, white anti-apartheid activist Antjie Krog's account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions used by the democratic South African government to address the crimes of the apartheid government. More personal work includes scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola's meditation on gender relations in South Africa, *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist*, and Indian-South African anti-apartheid activist Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary* (in addition to her authorized biography of Mandela, *Higher Than Hope*). Another remarkable story similar to Noah's is that of Sandra Laing, a woman born to white parents but classified as colored and forcibly relocated by the apartheid government, as documented in Judith Stone's book *When She Was White*. Other recent memoirs by black South African celebrities include rapper Kabelo Mabalane's *I Ran for My Life* and actress Bonnie Mbuli's *Eyebags & Dimples* (both, like Noah, are also from Johannesburg). White Nobel Prize-winning novelist and anti-apartheid activist Nadine Gordimer wrote extensively about how in apartheid South Africa, love quickly turned into tragedy, trust eroded between communities and often within families, and individuals grappled with the relationship between their ideals and their material interests. Some of her most prominent novels include *The Lying Days*, *Burger's Daughter*, and the recent *No Time Like the Present*. When asked to list his favorite books for the *New York Times Magazine*, Trevor Noah also included white South African Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*, South African essayist Khaya Dlanga's *To Quote Myself: A Memoir*, Ghanaian-American writer Yaa Gyasi's landmark intergenerational historical novel *Homegoing*, and acclaimed early Tswana writer Sol Plaatje's 1916 *Native Life in South Africa*, a response to the 1913 Natives' Land Act that prohibited blacks from owning land and one of the earliest books to expose colonialism's devastating impacts on South Africa's native population.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Popular memoir
- **Setting:** South Africa, primarily Johannesburg in the 1980s-1990s
- **Climax:** Trevor rushes to the hospital after his stepfather, Abel, attacks the family and shoots Trevor's mother, Patricia, in the head.
- **Antagonist:** Apartheid, poverty, racism, Trevor's stepfather Abel
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Film Adaptation. As of February 2018, *Born a Crime* has been slotted for a movie adaptation, with acclaimed Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong'o set to play Trevor Noah's mother, Patricia.

Second Book. Also as of early 2018, Trevor Noah is reportedly working on a sequel to *Born a Crime*, a second memoir that will follow his career and life after leaving South Africa.

PLOT SUMMARY

In his 2016 memoir *Born a Crime*, comedian Trevor Noah recounts his childhood in South Africa under the apartheid government and the first few years of democratic rule by the nation's black majority. Born in 1984 to a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss expatriate father, Noah is not merely an anomaly in apartheid South Africa; his existence is actually *illegal* because the regime outlawed relationships between people of different races. While the 18 chapters of *Born a Crime* generally trace Noah's childhood from his birth to the beginning of his comedy career after high school, they consist of vignettes rather than a linear story. Each chapter also begins with a short preface, generally about the social and historical context behind the events Noah recounts.

The first part of *Born a Crime* (Chapters 1-8) offers a portrait of Noah's family under the apartheid regime. In the first chapter, he focuses on the role of religion in his childhood. Every Sunday, his mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, takes him and his baby brother, Andrew, to three churches: an integrated megachurch that seeks "to make Jesus cool," an austere white church whose pastor focuses on interpreting passages from the Bible, and an informal outdoor black church whose congregants spend hours praying for Jesus to alleviate their suffering. He shows how Christianity offers his mother a

source of moral strength and discipline, which she seeks to pass onto her children. One day shortly after anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela is freed from prison, when **their secondhand car** fails to start, they take informal minibuses to church and nearly get attacked by an angry Zulu driver, emphasizing the danger and intergroup tension that continues to structure black South Africans' everyday lives in the wake of apartheid.

In the second chapter, Noah explains how he came into being: his mother's fearlessness was a lifelong pattern, and she insisted on becoming a secretary and illegally living in a white neighborhood of downtown Johannesburg long before it became clear that the apartheid system was falling apart. She has a child with Robert, the Swiss man who rents her a room, but never expects him to be Trevor's father. The doctors are shocked when Trevor comes out so light-skinned and, for the first years of his life, Patricia has to constantly hide him because, according to his complexion, he is not black but "colored" (the technical apartheid-era term for mixed-race people, who were considered an independent racial group and segregated from whites and blacks alike). When they visit her family in Soweto, the subject of chapter three, Trevor cannot leave the yard lest he get picked up and taken away by the police; Noah remembers feeling strangely isolated from his cousins and neighbors, but not yet understanding why he was considered so different. In the fourth chapter, he explores his early realizations about this difference and struggle to define himself in relation to South Africa's various native ethnic groups. By learning a number of different languages, Noah realized, he could connect to almost anyone and fit himself into situations where it would be dangerous to be an outsider.

In his fifth chapter, Noah tells the story of his mother's own "search for belonging." As her family's unwanted middle child, in her teenage years Patricia finds herself working on the family's farm and often going without food in the desolate, rural Xhosa homeland. When she returns in her 20s, she has to find a place for herself and moves into Johannesburg, doing her best to rise socioeconomically and support her son on her own. She insists that Trevor learn English and refuses to let "the logic of apartheid" set limits on his imagination or sense of self; when the apartheid regime appears to be weakening, she breaks new ground by moving into a suburban colored neighborhood called Eden Park with Trevor. In Chapter 6, Noah shows how his mother balanced her insistence on cultivating his curiosity—which led him to endless mischief, from pranks at school to burning down a white family's house—with firm but loving discipline. Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 focus on Noah's relationships with two important loved ones: his dog Fufi, who turns out to be "cheating" on him by spending her days with another family in the neighborhood, and his father, who is mysterious and reclusive but—as Noah discovers in his 20s—also deeply proud of his son's budding career and always strongly opposed the apartheid regime throughout his time in South Africa, even opening Johannesburg's first integrated restaurant.

In the second part of *Born a Crime* (Chapters 9-14), Noah tells a number of shorter personal stories from his adolescence, especially focusing on his relationship with others his age and early romantic blunders. In Chapter 9, Noah explains the ironic ostracism he felt living in a colored neighborhood where everyone looked like him: South Africa's colored people are actually a distinct, Afrikaans-speaking population descending from the children of early Dutch settlers and native women they partnered with (or, frequently, assaulted), as well as indentured servants brought to South Africa from Asia. As a result, Trevor looks colored but does not share colored culture, and his neighbors bully him extensively for at once being too white (speaking English instead of Afrikaans) and being too black (speaking Xhosa and hanging out with black kids). After one particularly demoralizing episode of bullying, he asks his stepfather, Abel, for help and then watches in horror as Abel beats the bully and threatens to kill the child's father.

In Chapter 10, Noah remembers the only other colored girl at his elementary school sticking him up for Valentine's Day. In Chapter 11, he explains that he navigated his lack of a distinctive racial or ethnic "group" in high school by reselling food from the cafeteria (since he was always first in line) and using jokes to pop in and out of various groups. In Chapter 12, he remembers a second romantic embarrassment: he has a crush on a popular girl but thinks he is too much of a geek to have any shot, then learns that she likes him back—but only after she has moved away to the US. In Chapter 13, Noah recounts his family's move from the colored neighborhood of Eden Park to the mostly white suburb of Highlands North, where he feels completely cut off from the rest of the children due to his race and ends up hanging out with the children of the neighborhood's black domestic servants. With one of his friends, Teddy, he starts stealing alcoholic chocolates from the mall; when they are caught and chased off by security guards, Trevor manages to escape but Teddy does not. Later, school officials and the police interrogate Trevor about who Teddy's accomplice could have been; they pull out black-and-white security video footage and Trevor thinks he has been caught, but they do not notice that it is him on the tape because his skin looks white in the video. In Chapter 14, Noah writes about the "mini-empire" he built selling pirated CDs and the horrific embarrassment his friend Tim got him into at prom. Tim sets Trevor up with Babiki, who is truly "the most beautiful girl [he has] ever seen," but on prom night Trevor realizes that she does not speak English, Xhosa, Zulu, or any language except her native Pedi (one of the few South African languages Trevor does not speak). She refuses to go to the dance and Trevor realizes she must be frightened. But she also kisses him goodbye at the end of the night, and he is dumbfounded.

Chapters 15-18, the third and final part of *Born a Crime*, follows

Trevor's budding independence at the end of high school as he transforms his CD "empire" into a crew of dancers and middlemen. In Chapter 15, he explains how his crew got locally famous through Trevor's DJing and their star dancer, Hitler, whose inconvenient name shows the ridiculousness of both colonialism (which forces black South Africans to choose white names and does not adequately teach them about history) and the *silence* about colonialism among Westerners, who easily see the inhuman atrocity of the Holocaust. It also gets the crew into trouble when they perform at a local Jewish school.

In Chapter 16, Noah remembers becoming the most popular middlemen in the dangerous, poor neighborhood of Alexandra, where his friend and business partner Sizwe lives. Although they are excellent at buying (usually stolen) goods for cheap and reselling them at much higher prices, they don't make enough to save much money or afford university tuition. Trevor realizes how poverty perpetuates itself in communities like Alexandra and how the law automatically assumes poor black people to be criminals—in fact, after the police destroy his computer during a concert, Trevor's business is decimated. He has a more severe run-in with the law in Chapter 17, when he gets caught driving one of the cars his stepfather, a mechanic, is fixing in the backyard. The police assume Trevor has stolen the car and throw him in jail, where he is frightened and pretends to be a colored gangster. Unlike many of the poor South Africans in jail, Noah is lucky enough to be able to loan money from a friend—who turns out to have just asked his mother—and get an attorney. When an imposing man joins his holding cell, Trevor worries about getting attacked—but then he hears the man struggling to talk to the prison guard, helps them translate, and learns that the man is actually "the biggest teddy bear in the world," who stole videogames to feed his family. Noah realizes how divorced popular images of criminality are from the socioeconomic realities that lead people to crime. Fortunately, he gets off on bail.

The last chapter of Noah's book recounts his stepfather Abel's escalating, years-long abuse of Patricia. While Abel is outwardly charming and beloved by the community, he drinks excessively—destroying his auto repair business's profits in the process—and cannot stand to see Patricia living on her own terms instead of submitting to his control. When he is drunk, his temper is uncontrollable: he beats Trevor so badly that Trevor avoids him for years, and every few years he brutally attacks Patricia. Each time, she calls the police, and each time, they side with Abel and leave. Eventually, Abel buys a gun and Patricia moves into a separate bedroom, then into a shed in the back of the house. Unwilling to watch his family deteriorate, Trevor gradually cuts off contact for some time as his comedy career takes off. Finally and courageously, Patricia meets another man and leaves Abel, who is furious and tries to murder her in front of their kids and her new husband. Trevor gets a call from his brother Andrew and rushes to the hospital, where Patricia miraculously survives despite having been shot in the head. However, Abel gets off without even serving prison time or losing custody of his children, and he continues to live near Patricia in Johannesburg. This last story attests to the culture of violence, abuse, and impunity in a country whose legal system still functions as during apartheid, protecting white people and their property against even perceived threats from people of other races but never taking black suffering seriously, especially violence against black women)

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Trevor Noah – Now an internationally renowned comedian, the narrator and protagonist of *Born a Crime* was born in 1984 to a black Xhosa mother (Patricia) and a white Swiss father (Robert). Trevor's very existence violated the strict racial separation laws of apartheid, and *Born a Crime* is his memoir of growing up during apartheid's end and aftermath. As a child, he is mostly confined inside because he looks colored, not black, so the government could forcibly put him up for adoption and relocate him if they discover him living with his family. When he visits his grandmother Frances and their family in Soweto, he cannot play outside with his cousins but also gets plenty of special privileges because they see him as white and he speaks English. Trevor learns to navigate his position as a constant outsider by building bridges through language: he learns Afrikaans, Zulu, Tsonga, in addition to English, Xhosa, and a handful of languages he never even mentions in the book. By always speaking with people in their native languages, he reassures and connects with them, building trust and often avoiding possibly violent confrontations. Growing up, Trevor is comfortable neither around colored kids (who see him as too white for speaking English instead of Afrikaans but also too black for being connected to his mother's family) nor white kids (who all live in walled-off mansions to which he is never invited). Instead, his closest friends are books and his mother. In high school, he continues to feel isolated from any particular group, but he finds a niche by spending his lunch hour reselling cafeteria food (which buys his bus ticket home) and joking with various groups of students. And, in the final years of high school, he starts the business selling pirated CDs with Tim and Sizwe that ultimately turns into a life of DJing and reselling secondhand goods in Sizwe's dangerous township of Alexandra after graduation. *Born a Crime* leaves off following Trevor's life after he has been doing this for roughly a year and had his first run-ins with the legal system.

Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah – Trevor's devout, fearless, and independent mother. The unwanted middle child of Temperance and Frances Noah, she moves from Soweto to the Xhosa homeland in her teenage years, where she works on the family farm and starves. She then decides to train

as a secretary even though black women are excluded from secretary jobs during apartheid. When she manages to get work, she secretly moves to a downtown white neighborhood of Johannesburg, where a white man named Robert rents her a room. She convinces Robert to have a child with her (Trevor) and then manages to hide him his entire childhood by keeping him inside or pretending that she is his family maid so that they can be seen together in public. She is dedicated to showing Trevor the possibilities that seem out of reach for someone of their family's class status, not to mention race, in South Africa—she does this by encouraging to read voraciously, teaching him English as a first language, and taking him on trips. However, she is also a devoted proponent of "tough love," beating Trevor to teach him lessons about the world's ruthlessness toward men of color. She is a staunch believer in prayer and takes Trevor to three different churches every Sunday in their **secondhand Volkswagen Beetle**. During Trevor's childhood, she manages to move to the colored suburb of Eden Park and then, after briefly living in her husband Abel's garage in an ill-fated attempt to save his auto repair business, to the white suburb of Highlands North, where they are the only black people besides the white families' maids. Her relationship with Abel is tumultuous: she insists on her independence, which infuriates him, and his abusiveness worsens over time until she leaves him and he attempts to murder her. Trevor dedicates *Born a Crime* to his mother, his "teammate" in life, because she has served as the foundation for all his accomplishments, not only by teaching him to think for himself and dream of the kinds of success usually reserved for whites during apartheid, but also by modeling that attitude and success when the odds were stacked against her.

Abel – Abel is Trevor's abusive alcoholic stepfather, Andrew's biological father, and Patricia's husband. From Trevor's childhood onwards, when he and his mother bring their **Volkswagen** in for repairs, the auto mechanic Abel is a constant fixture in their lives. In Eden Park, Abel once beats up a colored kid who is bullying Trevor and then threatens to kill the man's father, which makes Trevor realize that Abel is genuinely dangerous; Trevor eventually moves out of the house to get away from Abel, who has started viciously beating both Trevor and Patricia. Every time, Abel apologizes profusely after, convincing the family to take him back. He is also beloved by the community and goes out of his way to help those in need—the family feels caught between his outward and inward selves. Patricia sells the family's house and quits her job to try and help Abel fix his garage business, but he drinks away their profits. Eventually, Patricia moves to a shed in the backyard to get away from Abel, but she is afraid to leave because she thinks he might kill her. Ultimately, she meets someone else and does leave—and then Abel tries to kill her by shooting her in the head. Miraculously, she survives, but Abel turns himself in and gets off with no prison time. The police had never taken Patricia seriously when she reported the previous beatings, so Abel had no criminal record, and he convinced the court he needed to be free to support his children (even though they were completely dependent on Patricia's salary). Abel's constant violence and professional failure reflect the endemic problems that threatened black South African communities after apartheid. Abel is furious because he feels powerless and emasculated, unable to make a decent living because he has never learned how to run a business and obsessed with "controlling" his wife in order to prove his masculinity in a world that denies him any sense of honor.

Andrew – Trevor's younger brother, the son of Abel and Patricia. Trevor and Andrew are never particularly close—Andrew is nine years younger and much closer to his father, whereas Trevor fears and avoids Abel. This is because Abel respects Andrew (his firstborn) but sees Trevor as a threat (a reminder of Patricia's past relationship with Robert). In fact, Andrew frequently tries to talk Abel down during his violent outbursts, including the final one when he shoots Patricia in the head. After this incident, Andrew is the one to call Trevor and accompany him at the hospital. Trevor finds it difficult to imagine how painful it must be for Andrew to reconcile his love for both Abel and Patricia after this attempted murder.

Trevor's Father / Robert – Trevor's reclusive father, a Swiss expatriate and restauranteur with a disdain for apartheid who opened (and closed) one of South Africa's first integrated restaurants, then illegally lent Patricia a room in a white area of Johannesburg and agreed to give her the baby she wanted. For years, Trevor can only visit him in private, usually on Sundays, when they eat the same German meal and have occasional conversations (but mostly just share silence). When Trevor is 13, Robert moves to Cape Town and becomes incredibly difficult to track down—years later, well into his career, Trevor manages to get in touch with Robert and visit him. Robert is reluctant to share much about his life or past, but is incredibly proud of Trevor's accomplishments, which he demonstrates by pulling out a scrapbook with clippings of every single show and media appearance Trevor has ever done.

Trevor's Grandmother / Frances Noah – Trevor's incisive, devout grandmother, who runs the family's two-room household (with roughly a dozen residents) in Soweto. Patricia has a tumultuous relationship with Frances in her youth, but they later grow to trust one another. Frances loves that Trevor speaks English as his first language, because that means he can pray in English at the neighborhood's nightly prayer circles—and everyone knows "English prayers get answered first."

Trevor's Grandfather / Temperance Noah – Trevor's bipolar, eccentric grandfather, who loves chatting up Soweto's women (even though he is remarried after divorcing Frances). When Patricia tries to move out of her mother's house and live with him, he sends her to the homelands instead, where she has to work on the family farm and often go without food for days.

Koko – Trevor's blind, elderly great-grandmother, who spends all her time sitting next to the gas stove in Frances's house in Soweto. Because she is immobile and only occasionally chats with Frances, Trevor considers her something of a nonentity, which gets him into trouble when he decides on one rainy day to defecate inside the house rather than going to the outhouse—she smells it and convinces the family that their house is haunted by a demon.

Mlungisi – Trevor's protective, responsible older cousin who always follows the rules and helps Trevor get out of sticky situations (like when the other colored kids in Eden Park steal his bicycle, or when he gets arrested for driving one of Abel's junk cars with false license plates). Trevor eventually moves in with Mlungisi during the early stages of his comedy career.

Fufi – Trevor's beloved dog in Highlands North, who is beautiful but "dumb as shit," as she never responds to commands. Abel kicks her all the time and eventually relegates her to the yard; Trevor follows her around the neighborhood one day and realizes that she visits another family every day, which feels to him like infidelity and breaks his heart (but teaches him a "valuable lesson" about love—you don't own the people or things that you love). When she dies after getting crushed by the house's gate, the veterinarian explains that she was deaf (not stupid) and also incapable of feeling pain.

Teddy – The son of a domestic worker in the Johannesburg suburbs who goes to high school with Trevor and is also "naughty as shit." They spend hours wandering around the city and shoplift liquor-filled chocolates from the mall. When they get caught one day, Teddy refuses to follow Trevor through a hole in a fence in Highlands North and ends up getting caught by the police and expelled from school. He never admits that Trevor was the other kid with him and the school officials never suspect it, because Trevor looks white on the black-and-white security camera footage.

Tim – The shrewd and manipulative son of a domestic worker in Highlands North who resells Trevor's pirated CDs at his "proper ghetto school," Northview. Tim is always cooking up a scheme: he once pretends that Trevor is a famous American rapper and later sets him up with Babiki (but never mentions that she only speaks Pedi).

Sizwe – One of Trevor's friends who, along with Tim, helps him resell pirated CDs. Sizwe is sharp, popular, and good-hearted: he "[brings] out the best in everybody." He lives in Alexandra and convinces Trevor to start DJing, which makes them some of the most popular guys in the neighborhood. Trevor and Sizwe spend the year after high school hanging out in Alexandra, selling whatever they can get their hands on, and playing gigs around Johannesburg.

Babiki – Trevor's prom date, with whom Tim sets him up in exchange for a better commission on the pirated CDs they work together to sell. Babiki is incredibly beautiful and fashionable, which intimidates Trevor. When they actually go to the dance, she refuses to get out of the car, and Trevor realizes that they have never actually talked one-on-one, and Babiki does not speak any English, Xhosa, Zulu, or anything else besides her native Pedi. After a disastrous time at the dance, Trevor is thoroughly confused when Babiki kisses him goodbye.

Hitler – One of Trevor and Sizwe's friends and their crew's star dancer, whom Trevor compares to "a jellyfish if it could walk on land." Hitler becomes a local celebrity, although his name gets the group into some trouble when they perform at a private Jewish school in the suburbs. Since South Africans were forced to choose European names for their children in addition to names in their native languages, Trevor explains, many randomly picked the names of strongmen from history (like Hitler and Mussolini) without ever learning the real history behind those names.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Isaac – Trevor's youngest brother, the unplanned son of Patricia and Abel, who is born when Trevor is roughly 18. Isaac is four years old when Abel shoots Patricia in the head.

TERMS

African National Congress – Founded in 1912, the major civil rights organization fighting for racial equality and the end of apartheid in South Africa, although it was formally outlawed but continued in secret from 1960-1990. Since Nelson Mandela's 1994 election to the presidency, the ANC has become South Africa's governing political party. It is a multiethnic coalition with broad support among black South Africans and particularly the Xhosa.

Afrikaans – The predominant language among South African Afrikaners and colored communities, a version of Dutch brought by settler colonists that gradually evolved into a separate language over the course of centuries.

Afrikaners – The descendants of Dutch settlers in South Africa, many of whom moved inland in the nineteenth century after losing control of Cape Town to the British. Afrikaners ran the apartheid government from 1948-1990 and introduced the Afrikaans language to South Africa.

Alexandra (Alex) – A cramped, poor, black township in Johannesburg. Because it is surrounded by wealthier white areas, it cannot expand, unlike Soweto. After high school, **Trevor** spends a year hanging out with **Sizwe** in Alexandra, selling pirated CDs.

Apartheid – The white supremacist legal system in place under the Afrikaner government from 1948 until 1990 that codified racial segregation and the political and economic disenfranchisements of nonwhites. All South Africans were

classified as white, colored, Indian, or black. Each group was assigned to live in distinctive areas and use distinctive facilities, with blacks forcibly relocated to crowded slums (townships) or depleted rural areas (homelands) and the majority of land and resources reserved in practice for the small white majority. It was also illegal for these groups to intermarry, which is why **Trevor Noah** was "born a crime." The author describes the process of apartheid as slavery, segregation, and displacement all at the same time.

Cape Town – The oldest city in South Africa and the largest city in the country's western portion, where **Robert** moves when **Trevor** is 13.

Colored – A racial category under apartheid as well as a distinctive South African ethnic group descended from Dutch colonists in Cape Town and native Khoisan women (in addition to Dutch slaves from Indonesia, indentured servants from India, and other local tribal groups). Although they are the most genetically mixed population on Earth, colored people predominantly speak Afrikaans and identify with the Afrikaner culture of their patrilineal lines. Under apartheid, those deemed "colored" (who did not necessarily always line up with people from the colored ethnic group) were treated as "almost-whites" and given incentives to distance themselves from the African dimensions of their identities; in fact, people can even be "promoted" from colored to white (or black to colored) depending on how they look. **Trevor** looks colored, in apartheid's system of classification based on skin color, but is not part of the distinctive colored ethnicity and only speaks broken Afrikaans, so he faces significant bullying and abuse from colored kids.

Eden Park – A colored suburban neighborhood in Johannesburg where **Patricia** and **Trevor** move after apartheid. For the first time, they have a full house and Trevor has his own room, which makes him uncomfortable. The other colored kids in the neighborhood look down on Trevor both for speaking English (instead of Afrikaans) and for remaining so closely tied to his Xhosa roots (while colored people lost their cultural ties to native African groups many generations ago).

Highlands North – A white Johannesburg suburb where well-off families live behind walls and barbed wire. **Trevor** moves into a house there with **Patricia** and **Abel** and lives there throughout high school (after which he moves down the street and his mother stays in the area for many years). He is "the only black kid" besides the children of white families' maids and feels socially isolated.

Homelands – Also known as *Bantustans*, homelands were isolated rural areas to which the apartheid government deported urban South African blacks en masse. People from each ethnic group were sent to the same homelands so that different groups would remain divided instead of uniting against the government. The lands inevitably grew crowded and depleted, leading their populations to fall into extreme poverty. In some cases, these homelands were even considered sovereign states—although only so that the apartheid government could more easily revoke blacks' South African citizenship and fail to provide them any social support.

Inkatha Freedom Party – A militant, primarily Zulu political party that was active in the resistance to apartheid but has held little power since the beginning of democracy.

Johannesburg – The book's primary setting is South Africa's largest city and economic powerhouse, populated by people of diverse races, mother tongues, and ethnicities. **Patricia** lives nearly all her life there, and **Trevor** is born and raised there.

Necklacing – A form of murder, particularly common during riots in the apartheid era, in which tires are put over someone's arms and chest, then the person is doused with petroleum and burned alive.

Nelson Mandela – The most internationally renowned anti-apartheid activist, the leader of the African National Congress, and the first democratically elected President of South Africa (1994-1999). Born in 1918, Mandela (whose Xhosa name is Rolihlahla and is also referred to as Madiba) was active in the ANC before apartheid even began in 1948 and was denounced as a terrorist and imprisoned by the apartheid government for 27 years as a result of his activism. Mandela shared the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize with the Afrikaner president who dismantled the apartheid laws and freed him from prison.

Pedi – A minority ethnic group that lives primarily in South Africa's northeastern Limpopo Province and the language they speak (both the group and the language are also known as Northern Sotho). **Trevor**'s prom date **Babiki** is Pedi and speaks no other language, so for one of the only times in his life, he finds himself unable to communicate with someone else in Johannesburg.

Soweto – An abbreviated form of "South Western Townships," a black township in Johannesburg where most of **Trevor**'s family lives and he frequently visits in his childhood (although he cannot go outside because he looks colored). It is an enormous, bustling area with approximately one-third to one-half of Johannesburg's population, but is best known in the international eye for the 1976 mass protests against the apartheid regime, during which the South African government slaughtered protesting schoolchildren. But police violence is always commonplace in Soweto—Trevor notes that the district is intentionally built with only two roads in and out so that, in the event of an uprising, the government can prevent people from leaving and bomb or massacre them. Nevertheless, Trevor adores Soweto's "aspirational quality," because everyone builds their houses for themselves, has to make do in the informal economy, and has a driveway (even though nobody has a car).

Swaziland – Now formally called eSwatini, a small, independent,

ethnically Swazi nation landlocked between northeastern South Africa and southern Mozambique.

Townships – Neighborhoods like Soweto and Alexandria, usually on the outskirts of major cities, that were designated for nonwhites during apartheid.

Tsonga – An ethnic and language group living predominantly in northeastern South Africa and southern Mozambique. **Abel** is Tsonga and teaches **Trevor** the language; when he visits the Tsonga homeland, Trevor notes that the culture is deeply patriarchal.

Xhosa – One of South Africa's two largest ethnic groups (along with the Zulu), who live primarily in the southern part of the country. **Trevor**'s family is Xhosa, and he learns the language from a young age. He notes that, while the Zulu historically fought colonial occupiers with military force, the Xhosa historically learned English and tried to negotiate with them—but neither of these strategies proved particularly effective, and animosity continues to simmer between the two groups.

Zulu – Along with the Xhosa, one of South Africa's two dominant ethnic groups, who are predominant in the Inkatha Freedom Party and have historically been the most militant opponents of colonialism. **Trevor** learns Zulu (which is closely related to Xhosa) from a young age.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM, APARTHEID, AND THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

South African comedian Trevor Noah's memoir *Born a Crime* recounts his childhood as his nation transitioned from apartheid, a white supremacist system of government based on racial segregation, forced labor, and the disenfranchisement of nonwhites, to a tenuous democracy led by the black majority. Noah is mixed-race, with a white father (Robert) and a black Xhosa mother (Patricia), making his very existence a violation of the apartheid laws against interracial sex. With his single mother, Noah suffers a kind of poverty by design: the apartheid laws are designed to ensure that nonwhites remain too poor and resourceless to fight the government. But the end of apartheid does not end this poverty or inequality; rather, it leaves lasting wounds, especially in the native African communities that remain stuck in a world circumscribed by violence, poverty, and suspicion.

The apartheid government under which Noah is born does everything in its power to systematically repress and disempower nonwhites, forcing them to constantly live under siege. Noah explains that apartheid exploited the minor differences among groups to keep them focused on one another, and not on the government: it separated blacks, Indians, and coloreds into separate territory and ensured that groups like the Zulu and Xhosa remained at one another's throats. Apartheid is a uniquely cruel system that combines the three stages of American racism—segregation, forced displacement, and slavery—into one. Most notably, it forces native Africans to move to rural "homelands" that are too depleted to farm or slums called "townships" that are intended to be unlivable. For instance, Noah notes that Soweto, the enormous township where his grandmother lives, was "designed to be bombed." There are only two roads in and out, in case the government wants to respond to unrest by confining people inside and killing them en masse from the air. During apartheid, the police already routinely massacre Soweto's residents; Noah sees apartheid's worst, gratuitous violence. Strangely, because he is mixed-race in a black family, he also directly sees "how easy it is for white people to get comfortable with a system that awards them all the perks." His grandmother gives him as much food as he wants and never disciplines him "because [she doesn't] know how to hit a white child," for instance, and he becomes famous in Soweto for his light skin.

Even after South Africa becomes a democracy, in many ways apartheid conditions continue; black natives, in particular, are now "free" but lack the opportunities or resources they would need to make anything out of this "freedom." They lack white families' intergenerational knowledge about how to advance in a capitalist society and continue to face severe discrimination. When Noah accidentally burns down a white family's house, luckily the family loses nothing because they have insurance; in contrast, when Noah's mother is shot at the end of the book, she does not have health insurance, and Noah has to foot the entire bill. Similarly, white businesses continue to dominate the economy, while Noah's family becomes penniless because they never learned that buying a business (his stepfather Abel's auto shop) means buying its debt. Apartheid also ensures that older black people are uneducated—the government prevents them from learning anything beyond how to count and work on farms, and they are not allowed to learn languages besides their mother tongue. This means that they cannot find jobs or form coalitions with natives from other groups even under democracy. Therefore, Noah notes, the "cycle of poverty and violence" easily continues. Those who do succeed have to pay what he and his mother call the "black tax," working harder still to help their families rise out of poverty. During his year after high school selling pirated CDs and secondhand goods in the crowded slum of Alexandria, he realizes that nobody can afford to leave the neighborhood, even though they are technically

still no longer forced by the government to live there.

Furthermore, while the new democratic government led by Nelson Mandela is egalitarian in ideology, it cannot substantially change the ingrained corruption and inequality that continue to structure poor black South Africans' everyday relationships to the law and government. In the poverty-stricken slum of Alexandra, the lines between crime and lawful living are blurred; the people Noah knows are in and out of prison all the time, and the police routinely harass him and his friends just because of where they are from and what they look like, at one point destroying the DJ equipment that is the core of their business operation. In the penultimate chapter, Noah himself gets briefly thrown in jail for driving one of his stepfather's fixer-upper cars and realizes that most of the others awaiting bail have committed crimes to help support their families. But Abel's abuse of Patricia in the last chapter shows that, while the police tend to punish poor blacks for doing little, they do not care about serious violence. Patricia calls the police on Abel at least three times after he hits her, but every time the police immediately take Abel's side even though he admits to beating Patricia. Ultimately, after shooting her in the head with the intent to kill her (and the whole family), Abel turns himself in and gets off without spending a single day in jail.

While Noah emphasizes the uniquely vicious nature of South Africa's apartheid and post-apartheid inequality, he by no means limits his consideration to his home country's past; rather, he continually points to apartheid's enduring effects and global parallels (especially with the United States, on which the system was partially modeled). Beyond showing the lasting effects of apartheid, he shows how South Africa can serve as a case study for understanding the way that governments cultivate misery among segments of their populations deemed enemies to the interests of those in power, and how this often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, ensuring that poverty and violence become ways of life in those communities.

IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND COMMUNITY

Noah's existence is not only outlawed by the apartheid system; the system also fails to neatly categorize him as black or white, and so his existence as a biracial man reveals the underlying flaws in the system's conception of race. Nevertheless, he still has to cope with apartheid dividing the world—and people continuing after apartheid to divide themselves—based on race. He is frequently forced to choose a racial group even though that he knows that inequality and oppression thrive precisely by sustaining such animosity. And yet he also recognizes his unique potential to define his own identity by bridging different groups, as well as to show those groups their common interests. Throughout the course of his memoir, Noah manages to find a sense of belonging in the world without clinging to any particular group or identity label.

Under apartheid, identity is defined according to race. But this makes little sense for Noah, who knows that his existence as a mixed-race South African proves the system's illogical foundations. Noah argues that interracial relationships challenge the very foundation of apartheid's racism because, quite simply, they show that people want to be together despite racial difference, not only ever because of racial similarity. This, in turn, is why interracial sex is illegal. Judging by skin color alone, Noah is classified as "colored," a group that falls between black and white in terms of rights and social status. Yet, practically speaking, this makes no sense: colored people are a specific, closed community, largely in Western South Africa, descended from centuries-old mixed marriages and most closely connected to white Afrikaner culture. Even though Noah is not part of this colored community, the apartheid system would have him live, work, and make a family exclusively with other colored people just because of his skin color, which shows how divorced apartheid's racist thinking is from the reality of how people define their identities. Luckily, Noah and his mother, Patricia, manage to escape detection, but he still repeatedly has to be hidden as a child: he cannot meet his father, Robert, or walk with his mother in public (she often pretends to be his nanny or maid). He cannot play on the streets with his cousins in Soweto, lest he be kidnapped by the government and moved to a colored settlement.

Because race is (for the most part) the dominant basis for identity in South Africa, Noah often feels forced to "pick a side" and choose part of his identity at the expense of the rest. Although he first attends an integrated Catholic school called Maryvale College, after the sixth grade his schools are always divided on the basis of race, and he is consistently unsure how to position himself—he is not particularly white, black, or colored, and he is certainly not Indian. At his first school, he grows close to the other black students and decides to leave his advanced classes to be with them. Similarly, he feels most at home in black neighborhoods (Soweto and Alexandra) and hates the white suburbs, where everyone else lives behind a huge wall. And he particularly feels ostracized by colored kids, who bully him constantly in Eden Park and show him why "it is easier to be an insider as an outsider than to be an outsider as an insider." However, when he briefly ends up in jail and goes to the cell under the courthouse for his bail trial, again Noah has to pick a group of inmates to hang out with based on race, and the choice is not obvious: he has been playing the part of the colored gangster but wants neither to reveal the part he is playing to the actual colored gangsters nor invoke their wrath by hanging out with the black men. So he goes and talks with the white men.

Noah's ability to pick various sides in various situations paves the way to the solution to his sense of alienation: he learns to

bridge different communities and show that belonging can depend on identities people choose and build themselves, rather than ones imposed on them by the circumstances of birth or color. The first chapter focuses on the three churches that Noah's mother takes him to every Sunday: an integrated church, a black church, and a white church. This represents the family's ability to create community on their own terms (rather than only on the basis of race), but also Patricia's fearlessness in the face of racism during the last years of apartheid. Noah uses business to remain at once an insider and outsider to everyone. By reselling food from the busy cafeteria line in high school, he manages to get along with everyone without needing to truly join one racial group at the expense of the rest. And during his year selling goods on the street in Alexandra, he again uses the social distance of business transactions to build connections with a wide variety of people in the neighborhood. But, throughout his childhood, Noah's main technique for bridging different identities is learning various South African languages, which allows him to communicate with most of the people he meets and signal that he is part of (or at least respects and understands) their group. This gets him out of potentially violent situations numerous times and makes him a marvel (and arguably the most popular kid) on the first day of sixth grade during recess.

Ultimately, because he recognizes that violent systems like apartheid thrive by making oppressed people focus on their differences rather than common interests, Noah simply refuses to define himself negatively by confining himself to one group and instead defines himself positively, by opening himself to various people, languages, and experiences. This is not only a tool for him to survive in a divided world where he does not neatly fit in any box, but also a means to heal the world by coaxing people out of their boxed-in communities and into a broader mindset of shared humanity.

LOVE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Noah's memoir is in large part an ode to his mother, Patricia, whose fearlessness and sense of purpose he largely credits with his eventual success. Since they grow up together, just the two of them, Noah long considers himself and his mother a "team." Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah—whose middle name is Xhosa for "she who gives back"—at once shows Noah that many rules are based on nonsense and that he must be careful about breaking them. And when he does break them—which he does all the time—she punishes him harshly, something he initially disdains but later comes to understand. In fact, throughout the book he realizes how little he understood about love in his childhood, even though his mother's love was the absolute key to his ability to escape poverty and violence. Retroactively, Noah realizes his mother's wisdom and sees how love can foster growth by teaching lessons through pain and, far more importantly, by creating an environment of genuine accountability and commitment.

Although Noah is inseparable from his mother for much of his childhood, they also have a love-hate relationship because Noah is as disobedient as his mother is strict. At first, her love seems to be a barrier to their getting along, and Noah does not understand why she is so hard on him, even if he admits he is something of a nightmare child. She does not let him listen to nonreligious music and makes sure he constantly reads the Bible; she assures him that, if he ever lands himself in jail, he will have to deal with it on his own because she wants him to learn his lesson. She also punishes him physically; he receives frequent "ass-whooping[s]" and is chased down whenever he tries to evade them. In contrast, he finds his Catholic school's corporal punishment so weak that he laughs his way through a spanking from his principal. However, this could not contrast more with the way Abel, Noah's stepfather, combines love with violence. When Abel beats him up in a closet, Noah realizes that Abel's violence comes from rage, whereas his mother's comes from love.

Four of Noah's chapters focus on his love affairs of various sorts, showing both how little he understood about love at the time and how love taught him some of his greatest lessons in life. The first of these chapters is about his love for his dog Fufi, whom he finds out is visiting another boy's home during the day. This teaches him that "you do not own the thing that you love." The second is about getting rejected on Valentine's Day by the school's only colored girl, who picks a popular white boy over him; he learns how much people's romantic behavior (his interest in the girl and the girl's interest in the white boy) follows social scripts and models social hierarchies, rather than truly following individual feelings and needs. The third is about his high school crush on a popular girl named Zaheera, who also likes him—but they are both too shy to say anything, and she soon moves to the United States. He learns that rejection is better than not acting at all, as inaction leads to uncertainty and regret. And the fourth is about taking Babiki to the dance—she refuses to go in with him but kisses him good night later, which shows him how little he understands romance and how much more he has to learn (it turns out that she does not speak English and has no idea what was happening all night).

In retrospect, Noah finally comes to understand his mother's motivations for parenting him as she did: she wanted to push him toward growth in a way that only loving relationships can. He eventually realizes that his mother was trying "to discipline [him] before the system does." After Noah's brief stint in jail, his mother explains, "when I beat you, I'm trying to save you. When they beat you, they're trying to kill you." Although he distanced himself from the family for years before his mother was shot, Noah ultimately recognizes that her love for Abel was much more complex than he ever could have known. Even though Patricia does end up leaving Abel, Noah also realizes that he

cannot blame her for failing to do so for so long, due to the complex interplay of their love and her fear that he would grow far more violent if she left (as he ultimately did). Noah ultimately comes to see love, not violence, as the solution to the sort of adversity he faced. Through reflecting on his relationship with his mother, he decides that love allows people to "create a new world" for another person—to create safety and force accountability in a world that seems otherwise completely defined by violence. And in turn he "create[s] a new world" for his mother, who decides to stop using physical discipline on her younger children.

As Noah learns the wisdom behind his mother's attitude toward him throughout his childhood, he comes to realize that she has always held him to extraordinarily high standards only as a way to "create a new world" for him by showing him the potential that the rest of the world refused to see in him. More broadly, however, he shows how love can foster growth by teaching people enduring lessons about others' humanity and creating relationships in which people hold themselves to fulfilling their potential. Whereas violence is almost always zero-sum, helping some advance only at others' expense, love can be a means to mutual growth, especially when it forces people to confront failure.

RESILIENCE THROUGH RELIGION, EDUCATION, AND HUMOR

Throughout his difficult childhood, Noah and his mother, Patricia, cope with their uncertainty, relative poverty, and fear of the violence surrounding them by using three important tools to manage their relationship to the future: religion, education, and humor. Noah's mother, in particular, views her future and fate as instruments of God's will; she dedicates countless hours to prayer in order to gain the sense of control and certainty that she otherwise lacks in her life. But she also encourages her son to educate himself and build his own future, just as she did for herself—not necessarily by staying in school as long as possible, but rather by thinking critically about the conditions that surround them rather than taking their assigned place in the world for granted. And finally, the two connect through humor, which allows them to name and confront their suffering while maintaining a broader, more optimistic (but still realistic) view of their lives as a whole. These three tools all help them overcome pain by understanding it from a new perspective that keeps a better future in view.

Religion is an essential source of solace and meaning for Noah's mother and, as he notes, many other colonized peoples around the world; it allows them to sustain hope in the face of their extraordinary oppression but also lets them concretely advance in the colonial society by following the colonizers' customs. Noah's mother is a devout Christian; she takes the family to three churches every Sunday, which last all day, and seems to believe that the more church she goes to, the more blessings she will get and the more likely she will be to have her prayers answered. At the very end of the book, they are: she prays fervently when Abel tries to murder her, and his gun mysteriously misfires four times, which the police are never ultimately able to understand or explain. On the one hand, it clearly looks like Patricia's prayers are saving her life; on the other hand, Noah wonders why his mother must suffer so immensely in the first place despite her piety. And Noah's extended family in Soweto always values his participation in prayer circles because he speaks English and "everyone knows" that God pays more attention to prayers in English. This points to both the way the family stays optimistic about their futures and the way that they seem to gain advantages by selectively emulating the colonizers who brought Christianity to South Africa in the first place.

Noah and his mother also use education to broaden their senses of possibility—to imagine the better lives they want and set their minds to pursuing and improving their chances at a job. This is not just formal education, but (even more importantly) the ability to think critically, which Patricia instills in Noah from an early age. Patricia "spoke to [Noah] like an adult" and teaches him English, gives him books (especially fantasy, which stretches his imagination) and shows him "places black people never went" so that "he will know that the ghetto is not the world." Through his mother's insistence on questioning rules and systems of power, Noah learns to think for himself rather than follow received wisdom about his prospects as a poor South African. Like white children, he learns "that the world was my oyster, that I should speak up for myself, that my ideas and thoughts and decisions mattered." Likewise, Patricia's own success is largely due to her schooling: because she managed to learn English in a mission school and pursue specialized job training, she could get the job as a secretary that allowed her to raise her children on her own.

Besides religion and education, humor plays an central role in Noah's approach to life and suffering. Although he scarcely discusses his comedy career in this memoir, his writing itself shows how humor can not only deflect and dull pain, but also—and more crucially—help people maintain a sense of realistic resilience in the face of obstacles. Noah's tone is tongue-in-cheek throughout the book, especially when it comes to describing the particular cultural quirks of his family or South Africa in general. While he and his family clearly suffer, he by no means views his situation as tragic. He particularly shares this sense of humor with his mother—most notably, they argue through jokes most Sunday mornings about whether Jesus really wants them to go to church (and three churches, at that). For Noah, this is as much a way of coping with the exhausting commute to church as a means of emphasizing that the benefits of devotion are psychological, fundamentally about its ability to change people's perspective, regardless of whether

they pray from home or church. The book's closing moment shows Patricia's remarkable strength and optimism through her humor. Her ex-husband Abel has just shot her in the head and nearly killed her, but she survives; when Noah visits her the second day in the hospital, she tells him to "look on the bright side," which is that "now you're officially the best-looking person in the family." They laugh despite their horrible circumstances, suggesting that their resilience is their greatest asset.

After he recalls burning down a white family's home as a child, Noah insists that he would not be himself without the ability to feel pain but not let it interfere with continuing to try new things and pursue his goals. In a word, this is the *resilience* he shares with his mother: both are well attuned to the arbitrary injustices of the world and neither represses their pain, but both have their techniques for going on in the face of pain, rather than resigning themselves to never improving their lot in life. Whether or not prayers are answered, fantasies come true, or jokes turn into a successful comedy career, Noah shows that these are all techniques for achieving resilience by creating perspective.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SECONDHAND VOLKSWAGEN

When Trevor and Patricia move to the suburban colored neighborhood of Eden Park, they get a rundown, secondhand Volkswagen Beetle that often fails to start (and forces them to take minibuses to church); nonetheless, the car symbolizes Trevor and Patricia's growing freedom in the face of poverty, as it allows them to go wherever they want, a luxury that most black South African families do not have and that Trevor and Patricia fully enjoy. They go on picnics, spend time in nature, and visit white neighborhoods they would never otherwise see. The car is proof that Trevor and Patricia are beginning to overcome the poverty that used to constrain both of them, even if their efforts to maintain the Volkswagen show that they never fully escape poverty's grasp. It represents both their means of escaping the townships and proof that they have escaped, unlike the rest of their family—even though Frances Noah's house, like every other house in Soweto, has a driveway that ends up sitting empty (and Trevor sees as a sign of its people's aspirations to economic advancement). However, the car is also how Patricia meets Abel: he fixes it up when it breaks and then, in an effort to deny Patricia the freedom to go to church, he refuses to fix it during their marriage, forcing her to rely on other forms of transportation just as he drags her back into the cycle of poverty and violence that she spent the first half of her life striving to escape.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Born a Crime* published in 2016.

Chapter 1 Quotes

The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other. Apart hate, is what it was. You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the very beginning of his book, Trevor Noah explains that "divide and conquer" was apartheid's primary technique of governance and outlines what South Africa's society looked like under that system. Not only were colored, Indian, and black populations systematically separated from each other (in addition to whites) but, most importantly, the different ethnicities among the large black majority were segregated and restricted to their native languages. By maintaining these separations, the government ensured that different groups could not communicate, mix, or (most importantly) work together to fight against white rule. And by creating subtle differences in the groups' privileges—like making colored people "almost whites"—the government ensured that everyone focused on getting more privilege for themselves within the system, rather than changing it entirely. This system allowed a numerically tiny white minority to rule South Africa and extract monumental amounts of wealth from its work force for half a century.

The end of apartheid did not dissolve these divisions and leave a harmonious and whole nation behind; rather, South Africa's different groups started cautiously interacting and turned on one another in an attempt to seize power over the country. In particular, the Zulu and Xhosa blame one another for allowing apartheid to take hold and fight for control of democratic South Africa, which leads to huge riots and continuous violence. This enduring division, reinforced by socioeconomic differences and people's tendency to stay in the same neighborhoods to which they were displaced, was one of apartheid's most important

legacies and serves as an important backdrop for Trevor Noah's childhood. Everyone around him defines themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, or both. For Trevor, those categories are muddled: he has a white father and black mother; he looks colored but is not; and he speaks almost everyone's language, allowing him to better understand various groups' separate experiences and, sometimes, connect them with one another.

> The white man was quite stern with the native. "You need to pray to Jesus," he said. "Jesus will save you." To which the native replied, "Well, we do need to be saved—saved from *you*, but that's beside the point. So let's give this Jesus thing a shot."

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

While introducing the prominent role that church—three churches, actually—played in his childhood, Trevor Noah points to the fundamental contradiction in the fact that indigenous people across the world tend to be some of the most devout Christians: they adopted their oppressors' God in an attempt to come to terms with their oppressor. Adopting the religion of the oppressor serves two important functions: first, it allows the oppressed to gain credibility in the colonial context, whether by getting baptized and perhaps gaining some legal or moral status in the colonizers' eyes or by getting them education and a deeper understanding of the colonizers' traditions, beliefs, and ways of life; and secondly, it gives them something to hope for and a source of moral strength. Yet it also seems fundamentally hypocritical: why should oppressed people trust the God who supposedly let Europeans oppress them?

Trevor's mother, Patricia, is a perfect example of this point, and as if to highlight this contradiction, her devotion often gets the family in trouble on Sundays (like when the minibus driver tries to kill them). Trevor continually points to this irony throughout the text, as his references to religion are sprinkled with self-aware commentary on the contradictory nature of South African Christianity and prayers (like when he prays to banish a defecating demon he knows does not exist, or when he frequently jokes with his mother about whether Jesus might want them to stay home from church). This ambivalent adoption of colonial norms is a consistent feature of the South African life Trevor depicts: from learning English and Afrikaans, to naming a child Hitler, to even eating McDonald's for almost every meal, the people in his life often valorize the West to the point of absurdity, using it for their own purposes and often highlighting the more fundamental absurdity that they are expected to identify with the culture that has been imposed on them in the first place.

> The triumph of democracy over apartheid is sometimes called the Bloodless Revolution. It is called that because very little white blood was spilled. Black blood ran in the streets.
>
> As the apartheid regime fell, we knew that the black man was now going to rule. The question was, which black man?

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In the years after apartheid's fall, various previously segregated and disenfranchised groups fought for control of South African politics; in particular, Trevor Noah notes, the Zulu tended to fight colonialism with military force, while the Xhosa tried to negotiate with Europeans (neither strategy worked, and both groups claimed the other group's failure was what allowed Europeans to take power over South Africa as a whole). Trevor even sees these tensions firsthand when a minibus driver nearly kidnaps his family—or, worse, kills them—after realizing that his mother is a Xhosa woman with a mixed-race child (which plays into negative stereotypes about her community). And the extraordinary violence that follows the end of apartheid lingers in the background of his memories from this period, when there was always a riot going on, always someone being necklaced, and always a roadblock of burning tires to dodge on the way to school or church.

Yet Trevor also notes that, especially among the international community, the transition from apartheid to democracy is usually pictured as peaceful and conciliatory, "Bloodless" and fair for everyone. In fact, he exposes the fact that this results from a biased perspective on history, and on what constitutes as political violence. Whites were spared, and the violence between different native ethnic groups was somehow considered apolitical, inevitable, or the product of an essential cultural backwardness, rather

than a political response to a political situation. Like concepts of criminality, individual success, and historical sensitivity (which Trevor focuses on in Chapters 15-17), this concept of a peaceful revolution is based on the narrowminded idea that revolution is only bloody if blood is spilled at the top, and the overarching tendency to understand South African history (as well as African and non-Western history as a whole) from the perspective of the Western countries and white people who colonized it, rather than the native populations who actually live there. Since his book is largely for an American audience unfamiliar with this history or likely to view it through this problematic lens, Trevor Noah is careful to recount apartheid and its aftermath from the perspective of the oppressed living their day-to-day lives rather than from the perspective of those at the top of South African society.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ In any society built on institutionalized racism, race-mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent. Race-mixing proves that races can mix—and in a lot of cases, *want* to mix. Because a mixed person embodies that rebuke to the logic of the system, race-mixing becomes a crime worse than treason.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, Trevor's Father / Robert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

As he prepares to tell the story of his birth, Trevor Noah explains why being mixed-race in apartheid South Africa was so difficult—it was literally against the law, and he could be taken away from his mother because of his different skin tone—and then, more theoretically, why the apartheid regime had to outlaw race-mixing in order to keep its "divide and conquer" strategy working. In short, he shows that racism only works if racists can convince people that there are essential and unbridgeable differences among races, and that people want to be apart and do better when they don't interact with those of different colors. The problem is that this is not true, has never been true, and will never be true; Trevor emphasizes that race is an arbitrary and constructed category, and his very existence proves that people "*want* to mix."

This fundamental illogic was apartheid's fatal flaw, but it also continued after apartheid, as Trevor sees the students in his school, others in his neighborhood, and even accused criminals in a holding cell divide themselves on the basis of race and antagonize those from other groups. While apartheid ended when black and international activists forced the white government to recognize the humanity of people of color, decades later the basic category of race continues to govern everything from educational and employment opportunities to how the police treat people. And, as proof of racial equality and the legitimate possibility of relationships based in shared humanity rather than shared color, Trevor has to both navigate this divided social landscape and try to show people how to look beyond race.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ There is something magical about Soweto. Yes, it was a prison designed by our oppressors, but it also gave us a sense of self-determination and control. Soweto was ours. It had an aspirational quality that you don't find elsewhere. In America the dream is to make it out of the ghetto. In Soweto, because there was no leaving the ghetto, the dream was to transform the ghetto.

For the million people who lived in Soweto, there were no stores, no bars, no restaurants. There were no paved roads, minimal electricity, inadequate sewerage. But when you put one million people together in one place, they find a way to make a life for themselves. A black-market economy rose up, with every type of business being run out of someone's house: auto mechanics, day cafe, guys selling refurbished tires.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Grandmother / Frances Noah

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

Soweto, where Trevor's mother grows up and his grandmother still lives to this day, is a township outside Johannesburg, effectively an area outside the city center that was designated for black South Africans during apartheid and then built with dismal facilities by the government. This is the tragedy of Soweto: people were given nothing, not allowed to leave, and treated as a constant possible threat (the township has limited routes in and out, Trevor notes, so that the government can bomb it

and trap people inside to put down protests).

Yet this origin story also creates the "something magical" in Soweto: people had to fill in the gaps for themselves, creating rudimentary informal infrastructure, building their own houses, forming their own businesses to get by, and supporting the analogous efforts of everyone around them. People grow resilient (for Trevor's family, this is through community prayer meetings). For Trevor, the most salient symbol of this aspiration is Soweto houses' ubiquitous driveways, which are useless because nobody can afford a car (except for Patricia) but important because they point to people's desire and potential to eventually have one. This is also in contrast to Alexandra, another Johannesburg township, which is surrounded by white suburbs and thus unable to expand; people do not have enough land to build or grow their houses, so while there is a sense of communal support based on shared suffering, there is no sense of shared aspiration and support for endeavor.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ As a kid I understood that people were different colors, but in my head white and black and brown were like types of chocolate. Dad was the white chocolate, mom was the dark chocolate, and I was the milk chocolate. But we were all just chocolate. I didn't know any of it had anything to do with "race." I didn't know what race was. My mother never referred to my dad as white or to me as mixed. So when the other kids in Soweto called me "white," even though I was light brown, I just thought they had their colors mixed up, like they hadn't learned them properly. "Ah, yes, my friend. You've confused aqua with turquoise. I can see how you made that mistake. You're not the first."

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, Trevor's Father / Robert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Even though Trevor's earliest years, when apartheid was still in full force, involved the most perilous racist threats to his livelihood, he ironically does not understand race at all until apartheid is long gone: he is too young to fully understand, seldom interacts with enough other people to feel different (beyond people pointing out his skin color), and even goes to a relatively integrated Catholic school. As he points out here, it is natural to understand color but completely unnatural to think in terms of race, which requires giving skin color a disproportionate weight in people's identity and arbitrarily turning a color spectrum into a set of discrete color categories. (Of course, when race becomes the basis for oppression, it inevitably becomes a basis for pride and self-identification as a counterweight, too.)

By recounting this memory, Trevor points to the sense in which the concept of race and racist attitudes that ascribe essential personal traits to people based on color are, at base, learned through socialization. Even though his race was always an anomaly for everyone around him (especially in Soweto, where he was famous as the only "colored" kid), he never saw it as significant until he encountered *racism*. This means that people's feelings about race, likelihood to interact with people of other races, and beliefs about those others are entirely the products of cultural influences from the outside. And this goes both ways: it implies that apartheid created the racist beliefs it used to justify its hierarchy, but it also suggests that democracy can create racial harmony by deconstructing those apartheid-era beliefs in the public sphere and forcing people to interact and understand one another from a young age.

❝ I was eleven years old, and it was like I was seeing my country for the first time. In the townships you don't see segregation, because everyone is black. In the white world, any time my mother took me to a white church, we were the only black people there, and my mom didn't separate herself from anyone. She didn't care. She'd go right up and sit with the white people. And at Maryvale, the kids were mixed up and hanging out together. Before that day, I had never seen people being together and yet not together, occupying the same space yet choosing not to associate with each other in any way. In an instant I could see, I could feel, how the boundaries were drawn. Groups moved in color patterns across the yard, up the stairs, down the hall. It was insane. I looked over at the white kids I'd met that morning. Ten minutes earlier I'd thought I was at a school where they were a majority. Now I realized how few of them there actually were compared to everyone else.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

When Trevor starts sixth grade, for the first time he truly

learns how "race" works because he sees that it makes a serious difference in who hangs out with whom; in the past, color was always a noticeable but unimportant factor, but now, it defines the social order of school. Trevor is forced to figure out where he fits within it, which is difficult because he simply does not fall under any of the categories in the conventional South African racial taxonomy inherited from apartheid. He is in classes with the white kids; he looks colored but has nothing in common with colored kids; and he has grown up all his life around black people, but suddenly realizes that in the most important respect, he is not like them. Fortunately, he speaks a half-dozen languages and can navigate this divided environment by appealing to people from various different groups rather than sticking with one.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ 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. Working for the family in Soweto, my mom had no more freedom than she'd had in Transkei, so she ran away. She ran all the way down to the train station and jumped on a train and disappeared into the city, determined to sleep in public restrooms and rely on the kindness of prostitutes until she could make her own way in the world.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, Trevor's Grandmother / Frances Noah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

As he recounts his mother's path from Soweto to living in horrible poverty in the Xhosa homeland and back again, Trevor Noah points out how Patricia's family actually held her back rather than propelling her forward because, from the moment she earned her own income, she was expected to help support all of them. As a result, she decided to run away from them and live on her own terms (although this does not mean she broke ties with them). This is central to her identity and system of values; she insists that Trevor be free to do whatever he wants as an individual (which is in part why she picks a name with no meaning for him).

The "black tax" is not a unique feature of apartheid; it endures afterward, defining the opportunities and resources available to black South Africans even once they have technical political equality. For one, they are left roughly a century behind economically, with whites having benefited from all the value they extracted from forced labor during early colonialism and apartheid, plus the fact that they created the rules of capitalism by which the country is now run. For instance, more than 20 years after the end of apartheid, South Africa's small white minority (less than 10 percent) still owns more than 80 percent of the country's land, simply because apartheid gave them all the land and nothing happened to it afterwards.

In the post-apartheid era, blacks are still living with the economy and institutions created by apartheid, and not only do they have to start from square zero (in terms of educational access, language barriers, cultural resources, family wealth, and so on), but they also have to support those around them who get themselves in debt or trouble. So while white families generally offer their children advantages in education and employment, black families generally mean more mouths to feed and obligations to fulfill, and hence the "black tax."

❝ When it was time to pick my name, she chose Trevor, a name with no meaning whatsoever in South Africa, no precedent in my family. It's not even a Biblical name. It's just a name. My mother wanted her child beholden to no fate. She wanted me to be free to go anywhere, do anything, be anyone.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

After he explains his mother's path through life and decision to have him, Trevor Noah elaborates her justifications for two major decisions in his upbringing: teaching him English (the main language of business, entertainment, and politics in South Africa) as a first language, and naming him "Trevor." Patricia's Xhosa name is Nombuyiselo, which means "She Who Gives Back" and (like most Xhosa names) rather accurately illustrates her personality. At the same time as

this is a benevolent defining trait, it also burdens her by leading her to take on others' obligations, and she places a premium on individual freedom for herself and her son; they both refuse arbitrary rules (like those of apartheid and Catholic school) and love exploring the limits of their world, whether through stories or adventures, constantly buying new houses in fancier neighborhoods or trying to sell a secondhand DVD player for as much as humanly possible. So, afraid to restrict her son's potential by defining him with any meaningful name, she simply calls him "Trevor" and does not give him a Xhosa name. This is a deep gesture of her love, symbolizing both her aspirations for what her son can become and her desire to transmit her crucial values to him: freedom and independence in one's life decisions, living according to personal principles rather than others' expectations, and striving for excellence.

❝ My mom raised me as if there were no limitations on where I could go or what I could do. When I look back I realize she raised me like a white kid—not white culturally, but in the sense of believing that the world was my oyster, that I should speak up for myself, that my ideas and thoughts and decisions mattered.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In thinking through his upbringing, Trevor Noah realizes that his mother taught him an attitude about possibility that became central to the way he carried himself in the world. Whereas most black South Africans grew up with one language, in one place, around one group, and were usually unable to leave, Patricia raised Trevor with half a dozen languages in a variety of neighborhoods, with an intellectually serious attitude, a constant flow of new books, and innumerable adventures to places that black people did not usually go. This expanded his understanding of what was out there and what he could ultimately achieve; Trevor sees this difference in expectations as one means by which social inequality reproduces itself.

For instance, when he spends two years hanging out in the impoverished slum of Alexandra after high school, he begins to stagnate, and his mother worries that he is not reaching his potential because he is surrounded by people who are only thinking about their next meal, deal, or party; this shows how one's environment shapes one's sense of possibility and expectation, as well as how poverty (especially black poverty in South Africa) cultivates a specifically limited sense of possibility that prevents people from realizing their potential. But Trevor sees how, even living in the ghetto, it is possible to expand one's sense of possibility through exposure and especially love, which he argues at the end of the book allows people to "create a new world" for one another.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ I was blessed with another trait I inherited from my mother: her ability to forget the pain in life. I remember the thing that caused the trauma, but I don't hold on to the trauma. I never let the memory of something painful prevent me from trying something new. If you think too much about the ass-kicking your mom gave you, or the ass-kicking that life gave you, you'll stop pushing the boundaries and breaking the rules. It's better to take it, spend some time crying, then wake up the next day and move on. You'll have a few bruises and they'll remind you of what happened and that's okay. But after a while the bruises fade, and they fade for a reason—because now it's time to get up to some shit again.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

As an unruly child of about 10, Trevor Noah finds himself pressured to leave Catholic school (an offer he eagerly accepts) and then ups the ante by accidentally burning down a white family's house. Everyone is horrified, including his mother, who for the first time has no idea how to punish him. Luckily, the white family is also shocked, and they have insurance, so they do not retaliate against Trevor or his mother.

Trevor considers whether or not he feels guilty about what he did and realizes that he derives immense strength from his sense of resilience, which he shares with and learned from his mother. Yet he by no means flees from pain or responsibility. Particularly through humor and his generally big-picture perspective on the difficulties he encounters, he learns to feel the full depth of the emotions warranted by a situation without letting those emotions take over his life, drown him in regret, and prevent him from taking new risks in the future. This is the same attitude that lets his mother

react to extraordinary situations of violence and danger with a smile and laugh, or keep counting her blessings even when everything seems to be going wrong in her life.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Fufi was my first heartbreak. No one has ever betrayed me more than Fufi. It was a valuable lesson to me. The hard thing was understanding that Fufi wasn't cheating on me with another boy. She was merely living her life to the fullest. Until I knew that she was going out on her own during the day, her other relationship hadn't affected me at all. Fufi had no malicious intent.

I believed that Fufi was *my* dog but of course that wasn't true. Fufi was *a* dog. I was *a* boy. We got along well. She happened to live in my house. That experience shaped what I've felt about relationships for the rest of my life: You do not own the thing that you love.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, Abel, Fufi

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Most days, Trevor goes to school and his mom to work, and they leave their dogs Fufi (who is Trevor's) and Panther (who is Patricia's) in the yard while they are out. One day, Trevor is home on vacation and sees Fufi leave their yard, then follows her—to another family's house, where they insist that she is their dog, Spotty (and even imprison her for a while, until Trevor and Patricia prove she is theirs with veterinary records and buy her freedom back). Trevor is devastated—he felt so deeply connected to Fufi that her secret life felt like infidelity.

Although in retrospect Fufi's betrayal of him is as humorous and self-deprecating a story as the fact that she later turned out to be deaf and unable to feel pain, Trevor is also serious about deriving a lesson about love: it is not and cannot be possession. This becomes incredibly important at the end of the book, when Trevor's stepfather Abel's feelings toward their family are completely defined by possession. Rather than the kind of love Trevor has with Patricia, in which they mutually enrich one another's lives and constantly look out for one another's interests, Abel understands love for his family as meaning that he gets to decide everything for them and be the only man in their lives; he thinks love requires his family's absolute submission and his own absolute power, whereas Trevor learns that real, constructive love requires people to see one another as equals mutually deciding to be part of one another's lives, freely negotiate the terms of their relationship (rather than relying on some preconceived concept of "proper" marital or family obligations), and refuse ownership and jealousy, which are fundamentally self-interested rather than oriented toward the other's well-being.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ While I was eating he got up and went and picked up this book, an oversized photo album, and brought it back to the table. "I've been following you," he said, and he opened it up. It was a scrapbook of everything I had ever done, every time my name was mentioned in a newspaper, everything from magazine covers to the tiniest club listings, from the beginning of my career all the way through to that week. He was smiling so big as he took me through it, looking at the headlines. "Trevor Noah Appearing This Saturday at the Blues Room." "Trevor Noah Hosting New TV Show."

I felt a flood of emotions rushing through me. It was everything I could do not to start crying. It felt like this ten-year gap in my life closed right up in an instant, like only a day had passed since I'd last seen him. For years I'd had so many questions. Is he thinking about me? Does he know what I'm doing? Is he proud of me? But he'd been with me the whole time. He'd always been proud of me. Circumstance had pulled us apart, but he was never not my father.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Father / Robert

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 109-110

Explanation and Analysis

In his mid-20s, as his comedy career begins to take off, Trevor Noah heeds his mother's advice and reaches out to his father, Robert, for the first time in more than a decade. All that he knows is that Robert has moved to Cape Town, but he manages to get in touch with him through the Swiss embassy and visit a few months later. He is full of doubt and apprehension, unsure if he will even recognize his father or if Robert will care at all about his life. When he arrives, Robert is as reserved as ever, but then pulls out this scrapbook that shows his sustained interest in Trevor's career and characteristically meticulous attention to detail. Beyond Trevor's most optimistic fantasies, Robert proves that his distance did not mean he did not love or care about

Trevor, but was more a personality quirk and unfortunate result of life's vicissitudes. Although Trevor never felt a need to be close to his father and Patricia did an incredible job raising him on her own (which was her intention all along and the pretense under which she asked Robert to help her conceive a child), Trevor gains an important sense of fulfillment and certainty from his father's deep, if unconventional, show of affection and support.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Colored people had it rough. Imagine: You've been brainwashed into believing that your blood is tainted. You've spent all your time assimilating and aspiring to whiteness. Then, just as you think you're closing in on the finish line, some fucking guy named Nelson Mandela comes along and flips the country on its head. Now the finish line is back where the starting line was, and the benchmark is black. Black is in charge. Black is beautiful. Black is powerful. For centuries colored people were told: Blacks are monkeys. Don't swing from the trees like them. Learn to walk upright like the white man. Then all of a sudden it's Planet of the Apes, and the monkeys have taken over.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

When Patricia and Trevor move to the predominantly colored neighborhood of Eden Park, the local kids bully Trevor viciously, who looks like them but has nothing in common with their culture. At the beginning of his chapter about this experience, Trevor explains the historical backdrop to colored people's relationships with other groups in South Africa. Although they are the product of relationships between white male settlers, native Khoisan women, and later generations of Asian immigrants brought to South Africa as laborers (and, by some accounts, the most racially mixed community on Earth), colored people have little connection to their maternal roots because Khoisan people were effectively kicked out of South Africa centuries ago. Thus, they speak Afrikaans and identify more closely with their white Afrikaner paternal line. But, during apartheid, colored people are considered a separate group and declared "almost white," given far more privileges than blacks but significantly fewer than whites. They are encouraged to aspire to whiteness through cultural assimilation, antiblack racism, and choosing lighter-skinned partners so their children have the chance to be "promoted" to white (which happened frequently, since racial categories have no basis in biological reality and so apartheid officials could reclassify people whom they deemed worthy). And then, when South Africa becomes a democracy ruled by the black majority under Nelson Mandela, colored people remain a misunderstood and unrepresented minority.

The story of colored people in South Africa explains the Eden Park children's disdain for Trevor, who is too white (he speaks English, not Afrikaans) but also too black (he speaks a variety of African languages and associates with his mother's family). However, the story about colored people in South Africa also shows how intergroup tensions continued—and in some ways accelerated—after the end of apartheid, and mixed-race colored people continue to struggle for a sense of belonging in a nation that now associates them with the oppressor (even though they were also oppressed under apartheid). As for the mixed-race, multilingual Trevor Noah, South Africa never makes a clear place for colored people to freely practice and take pride in their own culture—rather, they are always defined by their place in the middle of the opposition between black and white.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ As the outsider, you can retreat into a shell, be anonymous, be invisible. Or you can go the other way. You protect yourself by opening up. You don't ask to be accepted for everything you are, just the one part of yourself that you're willing to share. For me it was humor. I learned that even though I didn't belong to one group, I could be a part of any group that was laughing. I'd drop in, pass out the snacks, tell a few jokes. I'd perform for them. I'd catch a bit of their conversation, learn more about their group, and then leave. I never overstayed my welcome. I wasn't popular, but I wasn't an outcast. I was everywhere with everybody, and at the same time I was all by myself.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

When Trevor Noah goes to high school, he finds himself caught between a variety of groups who mostly segregate themselves based on race and ethnicity. He does not clearly fit into any: he looks colored but is not, speaks a bunch of languages (but English natively), and is too white for the black kids but too black (not to mention too poor) for the

white kids. Whereas he was "an outsider as an insider" among the colored kids in Eden Park—he looked like he was supposed to belong but then invariably revealed that he did not—he decides to become "an insider as an outsider" in school, learning to relate to every group even though he does not automatically fit into any of them. In addition to his wide-ranging language abilities, he uses his informal tuck-shop business (reselling food from the cafeteria because he is always first in line) and especially humor to relate to people, since both are universal and allow him to make a positive impression without having to share a group's defining traits (usually race, ethnicity, and class). Beyond managing to forge a space for himself and avoid outcast status, far more significantly Trevor demonstrates what integration looks like and how it is possible for South Africans to bridge their differences through openness, goodwill, and universal pleasures like food and jokes.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ I don't regret anything I've ever done in life, any choice that I've made. But I'm consumed with regret for the things I didn't do, the choices I didn't make, the things I didn't say. We spend so much time being afraid of failure, afraid of rejection. But regret is the thing we should fear most. Failure is an answer. Rejection is an answer. Regret is an eternal question you will never have the answer to. "What if . . ." "If only . . ." "I wonder what would have . . ." You will never, never know, and it will haunt you for the rest of your days.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 12, Trevor Noah recalls a crush that led him to "three successive waves of heartbreak"; he learned that Zaheera, the popular girl he liked, was not only leaving school but immigrating to America—but always secretly liked him, even though he thought he had no chance and was always too afraid to say anything to her. Before the short chapter, he includes this paragraph as a preface, which clearly lays out the lesson he learned from his unfortunate romantic failure with Zaheera. Just as he argues at the end of Chapter 6 that it is best to be resilient, to feel pain or embarrassment after a mistake and then move on, but never let negative emotions dominate one's decision-making in the future, here he realizes that courage is its own reward. As long as one is resilient, it is easier to accept failure and move on than live with endless uncertainty. This is how he and his mother manage to make difficult choices and move on, learning from their suffering without letting it define them.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ Life was good, and none of it would have happened without Daniel. Without him, I would never have mastered the world of music piracy and lived a life of endless McDonald's. What he did, on a small scale, showed me how important it is to empower the dispossessed and the disenfranchised in the wake of oppression. Daniel was white. His family had access to education, resources, computers. For generations, while his people were preparing to go to university, my people were crowded into thatched huts singing, "*Two times two is four. Three times two is six. La la la ta la.*" My family had been denied the things his family had taken for granted. I had a natural talent for selling to people, but without knowledge and resources, where was that going to get me? People always lecture the poor: "Take responsibility for yourself! Make something of yourself!" But with what raw materials are the poor to make something of themselves?

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

In high school, Trevor partners with a white kid named Daniel and a Chinese kid named Bolo to start burning and selling pirated CDs—Daniel and Bolo need someone to help them sell to black kids, and Trevor's status as the ultimate middleman continues to prove useful in business. When Daniel graduates, he gives Trevor his expensive CD writer, which is the key to the business, and this allows Trevor to build a "mini-empire" of his own.

Trevor uses this experience to explain not only the way that differences in familial and institutional knowledge perpetuate racial inequalities after apartheid—because white families have spent generations with "access to education, resources, computers," plus social networks and an understanding of how political and economic power works in South Africa, their children inevitably have enormous advantages compared to black kids. Simply ending apartheid and giving black South Africans the legal freedom to do whatever they want is not enough to help them flourish in a complex economy; rather, they need the

same "knowledge and resources" that allow whites to turn ability into success, and this requires a certain kind of redistribution—this does not necessarily always mean whites giving their possessions away to blacks (like Daniel with the CD writer), but it does mean plugging black people into the networks of power, knowledge, and access that white people have hoarded for generations. Trevor also deconstructs the common narrative that poor people need to take "personal responsibility" in order to advance economically: he shows that there is no such thing as individual achievement in a vacuum because all achievement requires influence from other people (teachers, employers, and the very people who decide what counts as "achievement").

❝ There is also this to consider: The name Hitler does not offend a black South African because Hitler is not the worst thing a black South African can imagine. Every country thinks their history is the most important, and that's especially true in the West. But if black South Africans could go back in time and kill one Person, Cecil Rhodes would come up before Hitler. If people in the Congo could go back in time and kill one person, Belgium's King Leopold would come way before Hitler. If Native Americans could go back in time and kill one person, it would probably be Christopher Columbus or Andrew Jackson.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Sizwe, Hitler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

When Trevor Noah and his friend Sizwe decide to add a dance crew to their popular DJ sets, their inconveniently named buddy Hitler, who is an incredible dancer, becomes the star of every show. Recognizing that readers will probably find Hitler's name jarring—just like the Jewish school where Trevor, Sizwe, and Hitler perform does—Trevor explains in brief how black South Africans are forced to pick white names (as a remnant of colonialism, since Europeans did not want to learn to pronounce African names) and often do so with little sensitivity to history or context (both because these names do not really matter to them and because the education system does a poor job covering events like the Second World War). So Hitler gets his name because South Africans know that Hitler almost defeated the British in the 1940s, which means he must have been "the toughest guy of all time." (Ironically enough, apartheid was partially modeled on Hitler's Germany.)

Trevor hopes the reader will understand that their own view of history is likely as biased and provincial as South Africans', simply because people tend to learn and prioritize their own history. Countries that participated in the Second World War understandably consider the Holocaust an unparalleled historical atrocity, but those who suffered from European colonialism and genocides in Africa probably feel the same way about their own oppressors. The former is a more common perspective than the latter only because the former history is more widely taught and because the governments that committed mass murder through colonialism are largely still in power. But to say that the Holocaust was definitively worse than colonialism, besides being unnecessary, is also being Eurocentric, largely because the true extent of colonialism's devastation was often not recorded and took place over a much longer period of time.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ It's easy to be judgmental about crime when you live in a world wealthy enough to be removed from it. But the hood taught me that everyone has different notions of right and wrong, different definitions of what constitutes crime, and what level of crime they're willing to participate in.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Sizwe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212-213

Explanation and Analysis

After high school, true to form and much like his mother, Trevor continues to question conventional notions of right and wrong from an ethical perspective. Busy selling pirated CDs and secondhand (usually stolen) goods in the crowded, poor slum of Alexandra with his friend Sizwe, he sees firsthand how poverty creates desperation and drives people to crime, as well as how the legal system as a whole systematically punishes the poorest, blackest segments of South African society precisely when they act out of desperation.

Indeed, since both black poverty and white property are the legacies of centuries of colonialism and a half-century of apartheid (which were both structured around whites profiting from blacks' labor), in the specific historical context of South Africa it becomes even more difficult to convincingly argue that respecting white people's property rights is morally more important than getting oneself

something to eat.

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 ramifications of what we do to others, because we don't live with them. It would be a whole lot harder for an investment banker to rip off people with subprime mortgages if he actually had to live with the people he was ripping off. If we could see one another's pain and empathize with one another, it would never be worth it to us to commit the crimes in the first place.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221-222

Explanation and Analysis

Although Trevor initially considers selling stolen goods in Alexandra justifiable, after he buys a camera and finds a white family's vacation photos on it, Trevor realizes he is stealing their memories in addition to a material object and begins to feel that there is something wrong with this work. The camera roll shows him "the ramifications of what [he does] to others" and forces him to see that his victims are not just anonymous white people who will turn out fine, but other humans with full emotional lives who are likely to feel a deep sense of loss at their possessions being stolen.

The most important part of this passage is that Trevor connects this experience to the attitudes that make large-scale oppression (like apartheid) possible. It is easy to perpetrate violence out of self-interest when one does not see their own victims, or at least does not consider them as fully human. This is why love and empathy are necessary to build a sense of communal obligation and why Trevor's capacity for both—and especially his ability to bridge different language communities in South Africa—could play a meaningful role in healing his country. Another crucial factor in Trevor's change of heart is his recognition that, beyond having this capability, he is also perfectly free to leave Alexandra if he wants, unlike virtually all of the people he encounters there. He spends his time there for fun, rather than out of necessity, which means that his personal profit from (for instance) selling the stolen camera does not justify the pain he caused its previous owners.

Chapter 17 Quotes

"I know you see me as some crazy old bitch nagging at you," she said, "but you forget the reason I ride you so hard and give you so much shit is because I love you. Everything I have ever done I've done from a place of love. If I don't punish you, the world will punish you even worse. The world doesn't love you. If the police get you, the police don't love you. When I beat you, I'm trying to save you. When they beat you, they're trying to kill you."

Related Characters: Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah (speaker), Trevor Noah, Abel, Mlungisi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

After Trevor has spent a week in jail, Patricia gives him this speech, explicitly laying out why she has been so strict for his entire life. Patricia's sharp distinction between love and violence—which Trevor failed to understand when he originally thought he had more to fear from his mother than from prison—becomes incredibly important in the final chapter, too, when Abel starts beating and attacking the people he is supposed to love out of pure anger (rather than out of a genuine desire to save them from something). Having lived most of her life under apartheid, Patricia recognizes that Trevor has to be prepared for the worst if and when he comes in contact with the law—which he learned rather clearly during his time in jail, not only from his own fear but more importantly by seeing the way poorer, monolingual black people without attorneys were treated. And so Patricia's deliberately strict parenting has been her attempt to impart wisdom and prudence upon Trevor, to help him learn and grow, and never to gratuitously hurt him.

Chapter 18 Quotes

I grew up in a world of violence, but I myself was never violent at all. Yes, I played pranks and set fires and broke windows, but I never attacked people. I never hit anyone. I was never angry. I just didn't see myself that way. My mother had exposed me to a different world than the one she grew up in. She bought me the books she never got to read. She took me to the schools that she never got to go to. I immersed myself in those worlds and I came back looking at the world a different way. I saw that not all families are violent. I saw the futility of violence, the cycle that just repeats itself, the damage that's inflicted on people that they in turn inflict on others.

I saw, more than anything, that relationships are not sustained by violence but by love. Love is a creative act. When you love someone you create a new world for them. My mother did that for me, and with the progress I made and the things I learned, I came back and created a new world and a new understanding for her. After that, she never raised her hand to her children again. Unfortunately, by the time she stopped, Abel had started.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, Abel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

As he traces how his stepfather, Abel, went from a charming family friend to a terrorizing batterer, Trevor comments on the role of South Africa's culture of violence and the relationship between these kinds of gratuitous violence and the beatings that his mother gave him. In a sense, then, this passage is his response to his mother's speech at the very end of the previous chapter ("When I beat you, I'm trying to save you. When they beat you, they're trying to kill you"). While he realizes that, in cases like Abel's and South Africa's as a whole, violence has a tendency to accelerate in cycles by provoking further anger and vengeance, Trevor credits the education his mother gave him with showing him how to diffuse this cycle by fostering understanding between enemies and having the courage to meet hatred with love. So love, too, is a cycle—Patricia's love opens a new possibility for Trevor: the possibility to stop others' violence through love. While he clearly recognizes the difference between beatings of love and beatings of anger that his mother laid out for him at the end of the last chapter, he also in turn opens a new world for her, showing her that she can pass her wisdom to Andrew without physical beatings. This shows how love makes mutual growth possible by allowing both sides to introduce new possibilities and forms of support to the other.

When he said that, my body just let go. I remember the exact traffic light I was at. For a moment there was a complete vacuum of sound, and then I cried tears like I had never cried before. I collapsed in heaving sobs and moans. I cried as if every other thing I'd cried for in my life had been a waste of crying. I cried so hard that if my present crying self could go back in time and see my other crying selves, it would slap them and say, "That shit's not worth crying for." My cry was not a cry of sadness. It was not catharsis. It wasn't me feeling sorry for myself. It was an expression of raw pain that came from an inability of my body to express that pain in any other way, shape, or form. She was my mom. She was my teammate. It had always been me and her together, me and her against the world. When Andrew said, "shot her in the head," I broke in two.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah (speaker), Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

After Andrew calls Trevor to say that their mother has been shot, Trevor calls Andrew back in the car for more information and Andrew reveals that Abel "shot her in the head." This passage details Trevor's reaction, a devastation on such an order of magnitude that no other experience in his life could ever compare. Beyond showing the human toll of South Africa's culture of gratuitous violence against women, this reveals the true depth of Trevor's relationship with and affection for his mother; he has frequently described this book as an ode to her (and of course dedicated it to her), but it goes deeper still: the threat of losing her makes Trevor feel that he has lost a part of himself and "broke[n] in two." This is no ordinary maternal bond (for instance, unlike the bond between Patricia and Frances, who are similar but still have fundamentally different values in many ways). Patricia's love has been so central to Trevor's sense of self, moral values, and understanding of the world that his identity seems to dissolve without her. This is the clearest proof of his argument that "love is a creative act [... that] create[s] a new world."

"My child, you must look on the bright side."

"*What*? What are you talking about, 'the bright side'? Mom, you were shot in the face. There is no bright side."

"Of course there is. Now you're officially the best-looking person in the family."

She broke out in a huge smile and started laughing. Through my tears, I started laughing, too.

Related Characters: Trevor Noah, Trevor's Mother / Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281-282

Explanation and Analysis

When Trevor visits his mother in the hospital the morning after her ex-husband shoots her in the head in a murder attempt, they share this exchange. Patricia's remarkable ability to stay optimistic and make a joke out of a situation that would deeply traumatize most people shows that her resilience truly knows no bounds: she seems to have already bounced back, and not even nearly being murdered can break her faith, sense of humor, or ability to "look on the bright side." This epitomizes her and Trevor's attitude toward suffering: do not repress it, but do not dwell on it; recognize that you are a victim, but do not define yourself as a victim; use faith, humor, and love as inexhaustible sources of strength. And so Patricia and Trevor end the last chapter just as they end the first, laughing and crying their ways forward as a team.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Trevor Noah's book opens with a copy of the 1927 Immorality Act, which creates criminal penalties for anyone in South Africa, European or native, who has "illicit carnal intercourse" with someone of the other race. Found guilty, men can go to prison for up to five years and women for up to four.

The Immorality Act is significant because it is the precise reason Trevor Noah was "born a crime." By outlawing sex between people of different races, the act prevents mixed-race people who might help bridge the social gap between them from being born.

In a prefatory note, Noah explains that apartheid is really "apart hate": it exploits the linguistic and tribal differences among South Africa's overwhelming black majority to "divide and conquer" by giving different groups slightly different levels of social status and ensuring that they fight one another, rather than collectively turning on the white government. The most notable division is that between the Zulu and the Xhosa, "South Africa's two dominant groups." The Zulu are traditionally warriors, so they continued fighting the invading colonial armies and suffering horrible losses. In contrast, the Xhosa "pride themselves on being the thinkers," so they chose to learn English and negotiate with the white settlers instead. For a long time, the Zulu and Xhosa "blamed the other for a problem neither had created," and after apartheid, their underlying animosity brings "South Africa [...] to war with itself."

The author more explicitly summarizes the motivations behind laws like the Immorality Act; he clearly implies that South Africa's nonwhite majorities could take power back from the tiny white minority if they were united, whereas "divide and conquer" focuses them on minor intra-racial differences instead of the big picture of white supremacy. The division between the Zulu and Xhosa parallels a set of opposing attitudes Trevor sees throughout the book in dealing with apartheid and racism: he can either openly resist the system and mark his territory through force, or instead more quietly subvert the system and think his way out of confrontations.

Trevor Noah knows that jumping out of a car hurts more than it seems to in Hollywood movies: when he is nine, his mother throws him out of a car on the way home from church on Sunday. She is very religious, like many indigenous people forced into Christianity: Jesus promises to save them from the same people who impose him on them and call their traditional beliefs "primitive." And so Noah goes to church Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights, and then to *three different* churches on Sundays. His "mom said each church gave her something different." Their congregations were also different: mixed, white, and black.

Noah's mother's turn to Christianity is at once paradoxical and perfectly logical: it's paradoxical because she is adopting the same ideology used to justify oppressing her, but it's logical because religion offers her a means of coping with that oppression. The comically hyperbolic fact that she takes Trevor to three churches in tandem every Sunday suggests that she is much more devout than most white people, but also seriously disciplined and comfortable traversing the racial fault lines of divided South Africa.

The first is a "jubilant" megachurch with a mixed racial congregation. The ex-bodybuilder pastor tries "really hard to make Jesus cool," and the worship band plays rock music. The second is a white church, which focuses on closely analyzing scriptures, and is where Noah studies biblical stories in Sunday school. At home, Noah's mother never allows him to consume popular songs or movies—only religious music and the Bible—so Noah always wins the Bible quizzes at white church. The third church is black church—sometimes a different one every week. The services are always outside and last much longer than they do white church; Noah decides that "Black people needed more time with Jesus because we suffered more." Likewise, his mom figures that going to more churches would get her more blessings. The best part of black church is watching the pastor exorcise demons from people at the end.

The differences among the three churches also reveal differences among the three groups in question. The mixed-race congregation shows the possibility of different races celebrating together, bound by a common belief. The white church shows the centrality of education in the white culture that enjoys the privilege to access it, which also points to how surprising it is for Trevor to out-Bible quiz the more advantaged white kids at the church. In contrast, the black church shows how suffering and poverty are defining features of blacks' experiences under apartheid. Africans also clearly interpret Christianity in a distinctive way, including how Trevor's mother considers blessings and prayers something of a tit-for-tat transaction.

Noah loves church but not the trips to church—it takes an hour to get to white church and forty-five minutes each to the other two (and sometimes back to white church at the end of the day). This particular Sunday, as often happened, the family's **secondhand Volkswagen Beetle** won't start. Noah's mother decides they will take minibuses instead and blames the devil for the car's failure to start. She and Trevor argue about whether Jesus wants them to go or not; she ends the argument by yelling, "*Sun'qhela*," a Xhosa word that effectively means "don't undermine me" and functions as "a command and a threat, all at once."

The geography of Johannesburg is also significant: the churches are in different neighborhoods because different racial groups are forced to live apart, and Trevor's mother's willingness to spend almost all Sunday driving—or even riding shared minibuses—attests to her resilience and determination. She does not practice Christianity and speak English to Trevor at the expense of her indigenous Xhosa traditions and language, but rather sustains them both alongside one another, which serves as a model for Trevor's efforts to bridge different cultures by refusing to compartmentalize himself in accordance with apartheid.

Noah is already the champion of his Catholic school's sports day because he always has to run from his mother, who has a habit of chasing him, in addition to throwing things at him (and blaming him when they break). So the usual order of business is, "*Catch it, put it down, now run.*" And, with Trevor always spending the grocery money on video games, he has to run a lot. (When he gets old enough to outrun his mother, she starts yelling, "*Stop! Thief!*" and watching the townspeople descend on him.)

Trevor's mother is as serious about disciplining him as she is about going to church; initially, she seems severe and even jarring, willing to go to any length to ensure that Trevor learns his lesson. She has no qualms about treating him the same in public as she does in private, but he clearly learns from her discipline—to run, just as he has learned to practically memorize the Bible.

Nelson Mandela is released from prison when Noah is five. Being so young, Noah scarcely understands what is going on, or what apartheid is and why they are happy for it to be over. But he does witness the violence among black South Africans trying to figure out which ethnic group would rule the country. The Inkatha Freedom Party, which is primarily Zulu, "very militant and very nationalistic," fights with the African National Congress, which is Xhosa-led but diverse. Riots and murder (especially necklacing, or putting someone's torso and arms in a tire and setting them on fire) are common. This violence is nearby, in the area surrounding the neighborhood where Noah grows up. But his mother never lets it dissuade them from going to work or school, and she is never afraid: she has God on her side.

Nelson Mandela's release is a crucial moment in the dissolution of apartheid because he was one of the most prominent activists against the white supremacist regime and spent more than two decades in jail. Yet apartheid's "divide and conquer" logic does not stop with the emergence of democracy; South Africa's indigenous groups actually escalate the violence at first in their struggle for power, as though internalizing apartheid's insistence that one group must rule all the rest. And yet faith gives Trevor's mother the courage to continue living her own life and refuse to compromise her goals in the face of such violence.

At the end of that Sunday—9:00 P.M. at the white church, late enough that it is dangerous to be out, even though they are in a wealthy white suburb—Noah's family finds themselves stranded, with no more minibuses coming by (these buses are an informal, private, unreliable system). So Noah's mother decides to hitchhike. Just as a car pulls over to pick them up, so does a minibus, which swerves in front; a man jumps out with a Zulu "war club" and threatens the car's driver. So Noah, his mother, and his baby brother Andrew get in the minibus.

The minibuses are informal and unreliable only because the government has failed to provide adequate transportation services for South Africa's black population; they have to make do for themselves, but the Zulu driver's threats show that many continue to see violence as the best (or perhaps only) way to secure a living—the man sees competition, not cooperation, as the means to survive.

Soon, the angry minibus driver and Noah's mother get into an argument—she is a Xhosa woman with a mixed race child, who was climbing into a random man's car just a few minutes before, and so she perfectly fits the stereotype of Xhosa women as "promiscuous and unfaithful." As Noah dozes, the driver says Noah's mother is "going to learn your lesson" and speeds ahead, furious and unwilling to let the family out of the car. At a stoplight, they jump out of the car—Patricia pushes Trevor out and jumps with Andrew after him—and then take off running, which is second nature by now.

The communal tensions between the Xhosa and Zulu play out in the microcosm of Trevor's mother's argument with the bus driver; again, it is easy for people to internalize the apartheid logic of racial essentialism and stereotypes, especially when someone like Trevor breaks down the assumption that races will always remain separate. The overwhelming atmosphere of danger and violence in the immediate aftermath of apartheid finally catches up with Trevor's family, and they're forced to deal with it on their own.

When they stop running, they realize that they are cut and bleeding. Patricia explains to Trevor that the men were going to kill them; they call the police to bring them home and, while they wait, get into another argument about whether this is all part of God's plan. Trevor wonders whether, next Sunday, his mom might be able to "ask [Jesus] to meet us at our house" instead. They break out in laughter.

While Patricia and Trevor have to save themselves from violence, they react to the situation constructively rather than destructively, through prayer and humor rather than blame and fear. This contrasts starkly with the bus driver's attitude and suggests that emotional strength is a healthier and more effective means to healing and survival than physical violence.

CHAPTER 2

In his historical preface, Noah explains that "apartheid was perfect racism," a product of centuries of fraught history. First, in the 17th century, the Dutch came to South Africa and founded Cape Town. They fought the native population and then created "a set of laws to subjugate and enslave them." Then, the British took over Cape Town and forced the Dutch-descended settlers to move inland, where they became "the Afrikaners—the white tribe of Africa." After the end of the British Empire, the Afrikaners took control of South Africa, sent a commission to "study institutionalized racism all over the world," and built the system of apartheid laws, which combined the three American stages of racism—the forced relocation of natives onto reservations, slavery, and segregation—into one.

Apartheid itself emerged out of intergroup resentment—the Afrikaners' anger toward the British, which they then turned against South Africa's native population (while deciding that they, like the British, were "white" and deserved associated privileges). Just like the Zulu and Xhosa after apartheid, at the beginning of apartheid one group subjugated others in order to cope with their own subjugation in the past. Racial and ethnic violence becomes cyclical when oppressed groups think their oppression justifies oppressing other groups in the future. In turn, apartheid was deliberately based on the assumption that, for whites to thrive, blacks needed to be as subjugated as humanly possible.

The chapter begins. Noah's family is mixed: his mother is a black Xhosa woman, and his father is a Swiss/German man. Race-mixing is "one of the worst crimes you could commit" during apartheid; it threatens the system so deeply because it challenges its underlying logic. But, of course, the laws never stop it from happening. In South Africa, mixed people are a separate racial category called "colored." Under apartheid, whites, blacks, colored people, and Indians are all forced onto separate lands; entire police squads enforce the law against race mixing (although, in practice, whites usually manage to sidestep punishment). Patricia is too fearless to worry about the consequences of having Trevor.

The apartheid regime's deepest weakness is the fact that racism is simply false: people from all groups are fundamentally capable of loving one another, and race does not create a natural boundary between communities. The attempt to turn mixed-race people into a distinctive category further shows that racial groups are hazy, socially constructed categories rather than facts of nature. Patricia's fearlessness again helps her defy the laws designed to manipulate her through fear and violence, reflecting the fundamental absurdity of a system that defines human life based on race rather than common humanity.

Patricia is also too fearless to settle for the jobs black women usually hold, so she learns to type and becomes a secretary, a job that the apartheid government begins letting blacks take as a response to international pressure over its human rights abuses. She moves from Soweto to downtown Johannesburg—which is illegal because downtown is reserved for whites (blacks have to carry passes and return to the townships at night). Patricia ignores the rules; Xhosa prostitutes teach her how to pass for a maid and advise her to rent a room from a "German fellow" (Robert) who does not much care about the laws. Still, Patricia is arrested over and over and has to repeatedly pay a fine amounting to "nearly half her monthly salary."

Once again, Patricia insists on defining the life she wants, then figuring out how to pursue it despite apartheid, rather than letting apartheid set the terms and limits of her life. In her youth, she follows her own instincts and sees oppression as an inconvenient obstacle but never an insurmountable barrier to her achievement. In other words, she refuses to follow unjust laws and refuses to compromise her principles or desires out of fear, even if this forces her to largely live in secret. The "German fellow" has a similar mindset and productively uses his privilege as a white man to help circumvent the same laws that create that privilege.

Patricia quickly joins the cosmopolitan, artsy, dissident, and secretly integrated social scene in her new neighborhood of Hillbrow. Doing so is risky, though, as it's impossible to know who is a police informant. Patricia starts spending more time with the trustworthy Swiss man (Robert) who leased her the apartment and eventually asks him to give her a child—not to act as a husband or father, but just to "make this child for me." After a long while, he consents, and Trevor Noah is born by C-section nine months later, on February 20, 1984.

Police informants are an integral part of apartheid's system of terror and control; they allow the government to break down the distinction between public and private life and catch people like Patricia, who continue to pursue their own private values despite being in conflict with public rules. Her fearless, independent streak continues when she decides to have Trevor—in fact, she does not seem to want a man in her way and does not seem to care that it will be extraordinarily difficult for her to live with a child of (technically, according to the government) another race.


The doctors are confused, but Patricia just says Trevor's father is from Swaziland—this is enough to fill out the birth certificate, even though she is clearly lying. Patricia and Trevor move to the nearby neighborhood of Joubert Park and occasionally visit Trevor's father in secret. However, Trevor cannot be seen with his white father outside—nor can Trevor be seen with his black mother. Patricia soon finds workarounds: it is legal to have two colored parents, so she brings a local colored woman out on her walks with Trevor. The woman pretends to be Trevor's mother, while Patricia pretends to be the family's maid.

Again, Patricia recognizes the birth certificate—official government business—as a farce and obstacle, and her bluff easily succeeds precisely because apartheid is based on the illusion that race is a true, biological, determinable trait. While the fact that she cannot even be seen with Trevor in public shows how totalizing and draconian the apartheid regime is, she again outsmarts the system in order to live the life she wants.

On holidays, Patricia also brings Trevor to visit her family in Soweto, which is literally "designed to be bombed" in the case of rebellion, intentionally built with only two ways to enter or exit. It's illegal to be colored in Soweto, and there "the police were an occupying army," outfitted with riot gear and tanks in which they frequently roll through town and massacre protestors. Because of this, Trevor never leaves the house and yard—he cannot play with the other kids in the street, lest the police abduct him and send him to an orphanage. Once, at age three, he digs a tunnel out of the yard and escapes, sending the whole family into a crisis. Since he is always inside, he has no friends, but is perfectly happy being alone and losing himself in his imagination even to this day.

Soweto is ground zero for the apartheid regime's oppression of blacks: it seems more like a war zone under occupation than a normal suburb, and its frightening design shows that apartheid's architects were fully aware of how much violence they were willing to perpetuate in order to maintain white rule. This works as much on the macroscopic level of Soweto as a whole as it does on the level of Trevor's individual family, which must hide him because it is literally against the law for them to coexist in the same place.


In his travels, Noah "meet[s] other mixed South Africans all the time," but the difference was that their families always smuggled them out of the country. Noah first encounters one of these exiles at the age of 17, after Mandela is elected to the presidency and it becomes safe to live publicly in a mixed family. Noah is astonished to realize that leaving was ever an option, but Patricia insists that it would make no sense: "This is my country. Why should I leave?"

While the author is somewhat astonished to realize that there could have been another way out of his childhood confinement indoors, his mother clearly trusted her own strength enough to always consider their difficulties surmountable. Indeed, she sought to show Trevor that it is possible to defy even one of the most oppressive governments in history and come out unscathed.



CHAPTER 3

In his historical preface, Noah explains how South African Christianity combines the colonizers' religion with traditional beliefs. In South Africa, traditional shamans remain more common than Western doctors, and witchcraft cases frequently go to court, like when someone gets killed by lightning and an enemy of theirs gets charged with murder by witchcraft.

Just as Trevor's mother combines traditional beliefs with Christianity, South Africans do not see a contradiction between Western and indigenous beliefs about crime, punishment, and social life—unlike the apartheid government.

Trevor Noah grows up surrounded by women; the only important male figure in his early life is his grandfather, the ironically named and happily-divorced Temperance Noah, who is gregarious and extremely popular among Soweto's women. He is bipolar, but the family does not know that until much later; he does bizarre things like driving a woman to her home three hours away because "no beautiful woman should have to wait for a bus," or trying to start a boxing match, at the age of 80, with 12-year-old Trevor. Since she and Trevor are her father's heirs, Patricia always worries about his other family members trying to poison them.

Temperance Noah's irresponsibility and instability force the family's women to take control over the daily labor of maintaining the household. Being raised by women and largely confined to the house profoundly shapes Trevor's views on community, to which he sees family as central, and violence, which he sees as destructive and best replaced with love.

The house in Soweto is usually full of women: Trevor's aunt Sibongile, who dominated her wannabe abusive husband Dinky, and his grandmother Frances Noah, who is old but sharp and commanding, "still to this day very active and very much alive." There is also Koko, Noah's elderly and blind great-grandmother, who spends her days sitting in the house's warmest spot by the stove, observing the family and chatting with Frances.

Sibongile's treatment of her husband shows the irony in men's insistence on maintaining control through violence when women truly control the home; like Sibongile and Patricia, Frances is steadfast and independent-minded, a trait which seems to run in the family.

This woman-centric household is the norm in Soweto: whereas Trevor is merely estranged from his father because of race, other children's fathers are either imprisoned, fighting apartheid from abroad, or working elsewhere in the country. Women keep the community running and replace their husbands with God: religion is central to life and nightly meetings are commonplace, with prayer followed by songs and often five minutes of "amen." On Tuesdays, prayer is at Frances Noah's house; Trevor loves singing and praying, and Frances loves his prayers because he speaks English, and "everyone knows" that "English prayers get answered first." Frances has him pray for everyone present, and Trevor is delighted to be "helping people."

Beyond fracturing South African society, apartheid also fractures South African families by offering men few truly free work opportunities; communities like Soweto run more or less autonomously without men, and prayer continues to offer women a means to sustain a sense of community, address and emotionally overcome their suffering, and feel that there is a sense of moral order in the universe despite their oppression. The family is also delighted to have Trevor pray in English because it is the language of the powerful, which points to the enduring irony of colonial religion in South Africa: native peoples have to believe that the same God they faithfully worship somehow blessed the Europeans who oppress them.


Soweto is "magical" because of its "aspirational quality"; it has little infrastructure and no formal businesses, but everyone manages to "find a way to make a life for themselves." It's possible to buy *anything* out of someone's house. Because they have little money, people buy their groceries and build their homes piecemeal: they get a piece of land from the government and gradually build it up from a shanty to a multi-room house over the course of generations. Frances Noah's house has two rooms—everyone sleeps on the floor in one of them, and the other is for everything else. They also rent out shanties in their backyard and, like everyone else in Soweto, have a driveway but no car.

Precisely because the apartheid government does nothing for black South Africans and keeps them confined in neighborhoods like Soweto, success would not mean leaving Soweto, but rather transforming it (and their lives) for the better, and they realize that they are the only ones who can do anything to achieve their dreams. The driveway clearly captures this image of aspiration; even if people never get to the point of buying cars, the hope of possibly getting one in the future keeps people going and creates a paradoxically "magical" atmosphere in the township.

The one thing that is impossible to improve is the toilet: there's no running water indoors, and people share communal toilets with other families. Newspaper substitutes for more expensive toilet paper, and the flies are a source of constant fear for young Trevor. One day, at age five, when pouring rain promises a perilous journey to the outhouse, Trevor decides to go inside—the adult Trevor interjects, joking that defecating is a powerful and profound act, which forces everyone to "forget how famous or how rich we are" and have "a moment of pure self-awareness." So that day, Trevor savors the comfort of going inside on the piece of newspaper—until he realizes that Koko is still there, sitting by the stove, sniffing the air and realizing "that something was wrong." Trevor slowly finishes, freezing whenever Koko asks, "who's there?" He stashes the newspaper under the rest of the trash.

Sanitation marks the limit of what individual aspiration can accomplish, because it requires government investment in infrastructure. However, Noah's joke about the universality of using the toilet responds to the assumption that Soweto's lack of sanitation makes its inhabitants' experiences of the world fundamentally different from those of people outside the township's walls (or those likely to be reading this book). Of course, it also points to Noah's own humiliating "moment of pure self-awareness" when Koko suspects what he is doing.

Later that day, when Frances comes home, Koko exclaims that "there's something in the house," which she could hear and smell before. Frances can smell it too—and when Trevor's mother gets home, so can she. She discovers the "shit in the bottom of the dustbin" and proclaims that it must be the work of a demon. She wakes Trevor up in a frenzy and takes him outside to burn the soiled newspaper. He is horrified as all the neighborhood's grandmothers file in for a mass prayer meeting.

The connection between the chapter's preface and content becomes clear: like South Africans hold court trials to address witchcraft, Trevor's family holds a prayer meeting to address an event that, in reality, has nothing to do with good and evil, God and the devil. However, Trevor is also clearly telling this story because of its hilarity; this illustrates his ability to turn what was humiliating at the time into humor in retrospect.

Patricia makes Trevor pray to "kill the demon," but he knows he cannot pray for "God to kill the thing that left the shit," so stumbles through a halfhearted prayer for the whole "big misunderstanding" to be cleared up. After "amen," the meeting disbands, and Trevor apologizes to God; he realizes that "this was not cool," especially because he distracted God from more important business.

Here, Trevor gets caught between his recognition that prayer is an important ritual for his family to regain a sense of security and his genuine belief in God, so his prayer becomes a personal plea for forgiveness.

CHAPTER 4

In the preface to the chapter, Trevor watches broadcasts of American TV shows, syncing up the original English audio from the radio, and realizes that the black characters with American accents "felt like foreigners." He notes that language carries cultural identity and apartheid used this fact to separate different groups by only letting schools use children's home language. It works the other way, too: by encountering someone else who looks different but speaks the same language, a person can circumvent the racist beliefs programmed into their minds.

While apartheid treats racial difference as the primary means to divide people and linguistic difference as a secondary one, Trevor sees that it is actually reversed in most people's everyday experience: black people who look like his family feel foreign because of the way they speak English, and it soon becomes clear that Trevor manages to relate with people who think he is "colored" by speaking their languages, which outweighs their racial differences.

The chapter begins. Trevor accidentally breaks his cousin's eardrum while playing surgeon; his grandmother beats everyone but him, claiming, "I don't know how to hit a white child." She is afraid that he will bruise and turn "blue and green and yellow and red." Trevor's grandfather sees him as white, too, even calling him "Mastah" and acting like his chauffeur. Even though Trevor is "way naughtier than either of [his] cousins," he gets off easy when he makes trouble—except for with his mom. Still, he understands "how easy it is for white people to get comfortable with a system that awards them all the perks."

While the white world sees Trevor as colored and he identifies most closely with his black family in Soweto, that same family sees him as white and actually replicates the same system of racial hierarchy that leaves them at the bottom. In this sense, by being mixed-race, Trevor gets access to how it feels on both sides of unequal race relations; this privileged understanding uniquely positions him to fight these same inequalities.

Trevor never realizes this is about race until much later. He thinks it is just "because Trevor is Trevor." He is famous in Soweto: giving directions, people say, "at the corner you'll see a light-skinned boy. Take a right there." The kids call him "white man" and touch and gawk at him. Most of them have never interacted with a white person before, since they never leave Soweto. Trevor gets to eat indoors at funerals, with the family of the deceased, even if he has never met them. However, he never thinks of it in terms of "race," which is a meaningless concept.

Of course, Trevor only realizes the social context surrounding his special treatment much later in his life, which shows how racism is learned in two ways: first, he has no concept of race until he learns it, and secondly, black kids learn to revere him based on skin color, even though it means nothing to them, and he does not see it as creating any essential difference between them and himself.

To "bridge the race gap," Trevor learns languages. His mother makes sure he learns English, which is the best way to get "a leg up" as a black South African. At home, they speak Xhosa. Trevor's mom teaches him Zulu (which is closely related to Xhosa), German (which she speaks with his father), Afrikaans (which she learned "because it is useful to know the language of your oppressor"), and Sotho (commonly spoken in Soweto). Once, an Afrikaner shopkeeper tells his security guard to watch out for "those blacks"—Patricia responds in "beautiful, fluent Afrikaans" and the man apologizes, saying he "thought you were like the other blacks."

Trevor and his mother both fight apartheid's insistence that blacks only ever speak their ethnic home language by using six different languages to traverse a variety of social contexts and build exactly the kind of interethnic connections that threaten apartheid's strategy of "divide and conquer." They do not choose between appeasing Europeans and getting along with other blacks; like with churches, their strategy is something along the lines of more is more.

On the street, when anyone asks him where he is from, Trevor simply responds in the same language and accent. When a group of Zulus chat about their plans to "get this white guy," he turns around and proposes in Zulu that they "just mug someone together." They apologize—they "thought you were something else." Language, Noah argues, is a much stronger unifying force than color. He "became a chameleon."

This episode is remarkable not only because Trevor shows he is no "white guy" by speaking Zulu, but also because he is actually Xhosa, the group with whom the Zulu have the strongest rivalry after apartheid. Because he has no particular, discernible ethnicity at all, Trevor can easily transform into whatever is convenient in any particular context.

Near the end of apartheid, private South African schools open their doors to "children of all colors," and Patricia manages to get Trevor a scholarship to go to Maryvale College, an elite Catholic school. The students never define or divide themselves on the basis of race—but Trevor soon has to learn that the real world does, and that it will make him "pick a side."

Ironically, even though apartheid ends when Trevor is young, he is actually most shielded from its racism and effects during this period of life (when he is mostly forced to stay inside rather than interact with others and gets to go to an integrated school).

After the sixth grade, Trevor moves to a government school, where he gets placed in advanced classes—which are almost entirely white. At recess, the white and black students separate, and Trevor is "left standing in the middle, totally confused." Fortunately, an Indian kid, Theesan Pillay, recognizes him as a "fellow anomaly" and rescues him from his isolation. Theesan finds it "amazing" that Trevor can speak so many African languages and spends the entirety of recess taking Trevor around, having him talk with various black students in their native languages. Everyone is surprised and confused—they think he is white but soon realize he "belonged to their tribe."

The sharp division between the white and black students shows that educational inequalities start early in South Africa, with Trevor likely only in the advanced classes (which exacerbate this inequality) because he got to attend an expensive private school for free. Even after apartheid, the same racial hierarchy perpetuates itself through inequalities in resources and institutions. This is the first of many instances in which Trevor ends up literally caught between black and white and is forced to choose. Ultimately, Trevor's language abilities lead the black students to accept him even though he looks different, which again proves that language trumps appearance as a basis for group identification.

However, all the black students are "in the B classes," not the advanced ("A") classes with Trevor. He asks his counselor to switch over, but she declares that "those kids are gonna hold you back" and explains that "this will impact the opportunities you'll have open to you for the rest of your life." Trevor is adamant, though, and switches down to the B classes because he would "rather be held back with people I liked than move ahead with people I didn't know." He makes his choice: he is black, like everyone in his family and everyone he has grown up around. The black kids eagerly accept him.

While the counselor correctly recognizes that educational inequalities have a long-standing impact on people's success in South Africa, she blames this on "those [black] kids" themselves rather than the system that fails to educate them. Trevor clearly picks a side, the one that fits with his family and upbringing, and his skin tone does not prevent him from fitting in (just as the "B" classes in no way prevent him from succeeding).

CHAPTER 5

In the preface to the chapter, Noah notes that missionaries provide the only education available to black South Africans before the beginning of the apartheid government, and "nearly every major black leader of the anti-apartheid movement" gets this kind of education. During apartheid, the government shuts down mission schools and makes sure that blacks are confined to "Bantu schools," in which they only learn "metrics and agriculture." "Fully grown teenagers" are taught through songs: "*three times two is six. La la la la la.*" This is the difference between British and Afrikaner racism: the British promised natives a way to "civilize themselves" and potentially join polite society, while the Afrikaners thought, "why give a book to a monkey?"

Education—and, crucially, religious *education—creates a paradoxical solution to oppression: black people can learn to defeat colonialism by studying in colonial institutions. Of course, language abilities are another key element of this education, because leading movements against apartheid requires being able to communicate with people from diverse ethnic groups (which Bantu schools assured natives could not do). Afrikaners' racism is a self-fulfilling prophecy: because they do not see blacks as human, they refuse to give them an education, then point to this lack of education as proof of blacks' "primitive" and inferior culture.*

Noah explains that he is "a product of [his mother's] search for belonging." Her parents are forced to move to Soweto and divorce soon after having her; Patricia is "the problem child" and fights constantly with her mother (Frances) but loves accompanying her father (Temperance) "on his manic misadventures." She tries to move in with Temperance at the age of nine, but he sends her to live in Transkei, the Xhosa "homeland," with his sister.

In fact, the family's "search for belonging" is intergenerational: the last chapter recounted Trevor's earliest "search for belonging" through language, and Patricia's clearly relates to her parents' displacement to Soweto and family turmoil. By uprooting South Africa's native peoples and forcing them into homelands and townships, apartheid created an enduring legacy of identity confusion.

As the middle child and "second girl," Patricia is unwanted, and she ends up living in a hut with 14 other unwanted children in the overcrowded, infertile "homeland." She works the fields in the early morning and fights the other children—or sometimes the pigs or dogs—to make sure she has something to eat for dinner. At times "she literally ate dirt" to feel full. But she is lucky to go to one of the only remaining mission schools and learn English, which gets her a job at a nearby factory, which pays her with dinner.

Unlike Trevor, Patricia could never truly rely on her family; when she goes to the homelands, she is effectively stranded, forced to fend for herself in a place with virtually nothing, which is typical of the experiences of the first generation born under apartheid. However, her brutal suffering teaches her resilience, and the mission school offers her a chance to advance socioeconomically when she returns.

When Patricia is 21, her aunt gets sick, so she has to return to Soweto. This is when she takes the typing course and works as a secretary—but all her money goes to the family, which "is the curse of being black and poor," having to work endlessly to help everyone else catch up. She soon tires of paying this "black tax" and runs away to live in downtown Johannesburg.

While the family never did much for Patricia, now she has to do everything for them—the "black tax" is another crucial barrier to socioeconomic progress, simply because the community's enduring need absorbs any individual progress. Although Noah does not necessarily defend his mother's decision to put her own needs first and leave the family, it clearly makes sense given the family's earlier abandonment of her and also was instrumental to her ability to raise him independently and successfully.

Patricia tells this story in occasional vignettes—never all at once—and only so Trevor wouldn't "take for granted how we got to where we were." She thinks it wrong to dwell on past suffering, so she never does, even though she also wants to ensure her son never suffers like she did.

In fact, Patricia's entire story of suffering seems at odds with her close relationship to her family during Trevor's childhood; she understands how pain can be both motivating and discouraging, but does everything she can to make sure Trevor sees it in the first light.

Most Xhosa names become self-fulfilling prophecies; Patricia's, "Nombuyiselo," means "She Who Gives Back," and is fitting: even as a child, she would care for younger, abandoned children. So, to exempt her son from fate, she names him "Trevor, a name with no meaning whatsoever in South Africa, no precedent in my family. It's not even a Biblical name." He is free to become whomever he wants.

Patricia's most central values are freedom and independence, which she had to spend much of her own life fighting for—and yet she uses her own freedom to help others pursue theirs. Accordingly, Trevor's name makes him free because he is not forced to belong anywhere in particular—and can instead choose his own identity and sense of belonging.

Patricia also makes sure Trevor speaks English as his first language and gives him as many books as possible—he treasures them and particularly loves fantasy. She "spoke to [Trevor] like an adult, which was unusual." Unlike school, Patricia teaches Trevor to *think*.

Patricia treats parenting as something of a moral mission, and she clearly succeeds. In order to help Trevor take advantage of the freedom she seeks to offer him, Patricia also needs to give him the ability to think for himself and the resources (namely, the English language) to expertly navigate his country.

Apartheid ends gradually, with various laws coming off the books or otherwise losing their force. A few months before its ultimate collapse, Patricia and Trevor move to Eden Park, a colored neighborhood with real, suburban houses, surrounded by black townships. Trevor is uncomfortable having his own bedroom and sleeps in his mother's bed. They also get a car, the **secondhand Volkswagen** that often fails to start up (forcing them to hitchhike). But this lets them freely explore—they visit every park and picnic spot imaginable. Patricia refuses to spend money on anything but food and books—all Trevor's clothes are secondhand and their furniture is always falling apart. Even the food they do get is the cheapest available, the meat often limited to scraps and bones intended for dogs.

Patricia realizes that apartheid is on the way out and takes advantage of the opportunity to create a better home environment for herself and Trevor, ending up in a place she probably could not have dreamed of when he was born and it was unclear whether apartheid would ever come to an end. While their Volkswagen's mechanical failures are a reminder that they are still relatively poor and have only achieved a limited sort of freedom, they nevertheless pursue their freedom at all costs, even if it means eating low-quality meat or dressing in rags.

However, Trevor "never felt poor because our lives were so rich with experience." They visit white neighborhoods and other "places black people never went." In essence, Patricia raises Trevor "like a white kid [...] in the sense of believing that the world was my oyster, that I should speak up for myself, that my ideas and thoughts and decisions mattered." Following one's dreams depends on the limits of one's imagination, but Patricia shows Trevor limitless possibilities, even though nobody ever did the same for her. And, most astonishingly, she does this all despite never having known that apartheid was nearing its end. She refuses to bend to "the logic of apartheid" and wants to make sure that, in her words, "even if [Trevor] never leaves the ghetto, he will know that the ghetto is not the world."

Patricia expresses her love for Trevor by showing him possibilities his peers cannot see; she recognizes that, even if he never ends up succeeding, this expanded sense of possibility is its own reward because it allows him the kind of perspective that would never be available to someone who spent their entire life trapped in Soweto. Just as she pursued her own freedom by living in a white part of downtown Johannesburg during apartheid, now she pursues freedom for Trevor by showing him things he can achieve through his own effort, even if the world does its best to thwart him.

CHAPTER 6

In the preface to the chapter, Trevor Noah explains that apartheid is full of "fatal flaws," mainly its illogic: for instance, Chinese people are classified as "black," but Japanese people are considered "white" because the South African governments wants to import Japanese products and stay on good terms with the Japanese government. Imagine a policeman trying to figure out if an Asian person is on the right beach or not!

Noah again points to the fundamental difference between racism and reality; no matter how hard it tries, the apartheid system can never fully separate people because real people do not fit cleanly into socially constructed racial categories. The fact that Chinese and Japanese people end up in opposite categories shows that these categories are actually constructed to serve the government's own self-interest rather than based in any distinguishable biological reality.

Trevor is something of a nightmare child: he reads endlessly, eats "like a pig" (and always gets seconds in Soweto), and needs "constant stimulation and activity"; he frustrates nannies and teachers, despite his "good manners." Patricia takes to playing fetch with him, like a dog. He plays pranks at school and is "endlessly fascinated by" fire and knives. One day, he burns off his eyebrows and part of his hair while combining the gunpowder from a bunch of small fireworks. He thinks of this as a creative tendency, not a destructive one—even though he manages to break pretty much every rule set up for him.

It is remarkable that Patricia puts up with Trevor's antics (rather than pushing him away, like her family did with her by sending her to the homelands). But it is also curious that Trevor thinks of his pyromania as constructive, because this shows that it in some way fulfills his mother's attempts to help him think for himself and pursue his own creativity. He breaks rules not only because he is defiant, but also because he is curious about why those rules exist in the first place.

Patricia has some useful tactics for getting Trevor to fall in line. One day, he wants a toffee apple at the grocery store, so she sends him running for it when they are about to reach the checkout aisle. When he returns, he gives it to her, but she pretends not to be his mother, and the cashier tells him off. Crying, Trevor drops the apple and catches up to Patricia in **the car**. Eventually, when Trevor proves "quicker in an argument," his mother starts writing him letters and he replies in kind, having learned the art of formal letter-writing while visiting her at the office. Whenever they are on the brink of a verbal fight, she says, "Ah-ah-ah. No. You have to write a letter."

Patricia's tactics are clever and creative ways to teach Trevor lessons: the episode with the toffee apple reminds him about people's prejudices (the cashier's prejudices led him to think Patricia and Trevor could not possibly be related) and the way white strangers will treat people who look like him. The letters are a way of furthering his education and teaching him to resolve conflicts through thoughtful deliberation rather than argument.

As for all the other kids Trevor knows, "ass-whooping" is still the standard punishment for anything major. Unfortunately for Patricia, Trevor is incredibly fast, but she still hits him "on the fly" when she can manage. Yet he knows that this came "from a place of love," never from "rage or anger." Trevor's Catholic school also uses corporal punishment, but he finds the principal's spankings so weak that he starts laughing in the middle of one, which leads the principal to send him to a psychologist. In fact, the school sends Trevor to a psychologist three times, but all of them insist that "there's nothing wrong with this kid," who is, in his words, "just creative and independent and full of energy."

Trevor recognizes that his mother is only draconian about punishing him because she wants to impart her wisdom, and for him this is the distinguishing factor between love and violence. The fact that Trevor is "creative and independent and full of energy" might actually be why his school thinks there is something "wrong with" him psychologically: even though it is a relatively comfortable private school, Maryvale is more interested in preserving order than fostering independent thought.

Trevor also refuses to follow rules that do not make sense. For instance, he is not allowed to take the communion at mass (grape juice and a cracker) because he is not Catholic. He finds this strange, since it implies that "Jesus would not be allowed to have the body and blood of Jesus," seeing as Jesus was Jewish, not Roman Catholic. So one day, Trevor drinks all the grape juice and eats all the crackers before mass—during confession, another student tells a priest, who tells the administration (but, Trevor insists, breaks the rules of confession by doing so). So he gets sent to the psychologist for a second time.

Trevor sees the contradictions between the school's concrete rules (about not taking communion because he is not Catholic) and the principles to which they are supposed to more basically adhere (confession is private, and Jesus should be able to save even non-Catholics). He interprets the rules for himself, so he sees the people who set them as crazy (just as they see him as crazy).

The third psychologist visit is after Trevor brings a knife to school in sixth grade, as a way of deterring his bully from beating him up. The principal asks "whether you really want to be at Maryvale next year"—implying that Trevor needs "to shape up"—and Trevor simply says that he does not want to be there. His mother does not mind—she has since left her job and lost his scholarship, and she generally sides with Trevor in his conflicts with the school. Clearly, "Catholic school is not the place to be creative and independent"; like apartheid, it is based on a bunch of illogical rules. Patricia broke apartheid's rules and Trevor broke the school's; she teaches him "to challenge authority and question the system," except when it comes to God and the Bible. And of course, this leads him to challenge her, too.

Trevor circumvents the apparent point of the principal's declarations by taking him literally (just as he circumvents the school rules by interpreting the school's religion literally). Patricia is okay with him leaving the school because it shows that he has internalized her message about thinking for himself and refusing to let authority constrain him; he has learned to think despite school, not because of it.

Patricia starts dating Abel when Trevor is about six years old. Abel is renting out a white family's garage, where Patricia and Trevor often come stay (since it's closer to work and school). Trevor plays with the family's black maid's son—one day, Trevor shows the boy how to burn his name into a piece of wood by focusing light with a magnifying glass. They go for a snack, leaving the magnifying glass and a box of matches in the servants' quarters, which are full of wood and straw. They manage to lock themselves out and burn down the whole shed, and then the whole house—and the maid's son tells the family it was Trevor's fault. The white family has insurance, but they do kick Abel out, so he moves in with Trevor and Patricia.

Trevor crosses a line, and he clearly knows it, realizing that his curiosity is as destructive as it is creative. Importantly, the white family's insurance saves them from the kind of setback that would completely derail a black family's life. This emphasizes how inequality is based on knowledge and institutions (like banking and credit) in addition to differences in material wealth.

Patricia is too shocked to discipline Trevor, and he gets a "notorious" reputation in his family. His two cousins, who are "supergood kids," cannot understand him. Like his mother, Trevor is excellent at "forget[ting] the pain in life" and insists on continuing to try new things, no matter what.

Trevor and Patricia both recognize that he has already learned his lesson, and that this is the fundamental goal of punishment. At the same time, he knows that taking responsibility is better than fear or shame, which can be debilitating.

CHAPTER 7

Cats, Noah notes in his preface, are uncommon everywhere he has ever been in Africa. (In South Africa, "only witches have cats, and all cats are witches.") During a recent soccer match, a security guard beat a cat to death on live television like "any sensible black person" (because it was a witch). It created a media outcry among white animal lovers, and the man "had to pay some enormous fine." Of course, Noah notes, "white people had spent years seeing video of black people being beaten to death by other white people," and yet *now* they are furious at the violence. Anyway, "in South Africa, black people have dogs."

Noah shows how the division between blacks and whites in South Africa is partially about a difference in cultural logics: for blacks, it is only "sensible" to kill a cat; for whites, this is animal cruelty, but it is perfectly fine to kill blacks. In fact, whites see animals as more *deserving of rights than black people, which shows that racism in part functions through a breakdown in empathy and social recognition toward "other" groups.*

Patricia brings home two black cats a month after she and Trevor move to Eden Park. They are both excited and do not worry about "any nonsense about cats." In their new colored neighborhood, they figure people will not care. One night, they return home to find the cats beheaded, tied to the family's front gate, with a sign in Afrikaans: "Witch." Trevor doesn't much care—the cats were not particularly nice, anyway.

The reaction of Eden Park's colored population is curious—traditionally, as Noah later explains, colored people largely take from white Afrikaner culture, but their beliefs are more complex, influenced enough by the native belief in witches to logically see the cats as a threat. In this sense, Trevor and Patricia seem to have more in common with this colored community than they realize, even though it barely acknowledges them.

After some time, they get dogs instead, like "almost every black family" in South Africa, who keep dogs not as "members of the family" but more as "a poor-man's alarm system." Patricia and Trevor's dogs are two sisters, Maltese-bull terrier mixes, named Fufi and Panther. They have a love-hate relationship: they get along but also have bloody fights. Panther is Patricia's, and Fufi is Trevor's; Panther is ugly, and Fufi is beautiful; Panther is smart, and Fufi is "dumb as shit." Fufi never responds to any commands—after a burglar kills her some years later, the vet informs Trevor and Patricia that Fufi was deaf the whole time.

Panther and Fufi's love-hate relationship obviously parallels Patricia and Trevor's, and it is clear that for them the dogs are closer to "members of the family" than an "alarm system" (a purpose for which Fufi would be terribly suited). When Trevor and Patricia learn that Fufi was deaf, it explains her apparent stupidity but also shows them how little they truly understood about a being they loved.

Fufi and Trevor are inseparable; she does tricks and even manages to jump the yard's five-foot wall, which she does every morning after Trevor and Patricia leave the house. Home during school vacation one day, Trevor realizes this and follows Fufi across town on his bicycle. She jumps into another yard, where another kid insists she is *his* dog, "Spotty." The family locks Fufi in their house that night, so she cannot return, and when Patricia and Trevor show up with Fufi's veterinary documents and puppyhood photos, they manage to buy her back. Regardless, Trevor cries all the way home, heartbroken that "Fufi loves another boy." He learns a "valuable lesson": that "you do not own the thing that you love."

While Trevor Noah clearly finds this story hilarious in retrospect, it also shows how even failures in love can teach people valuable lessons for the future. His belief that "you do not own the thing that you love" becomes incredibly important later on, when he tries to distinguish the kind of love he feels for his mother from the possessive kind of love Abel feels for her; love, he implies, must be mutually beneficial and not for one person's personal gain at the other's expense.

CHAPTER 8

In the chapter's preface, Trevor Noah recounts the following story: one day, at the age of 24, Trevor's mother tells him to find his father. It has been more than ten years; Trevor assumes he will never see his father again. Patricia insists that he needs to get a real impression of who his father is rather than living with illusions about him.

The narrative jumps far into the future, to a point when Trevor has already moved out and started his career. Patricia has fulfilled her dream of raising Trevor on her own terms, without needing a man's support, and Trevor has no strong sense of longing for his father, but Patricia still thinks he can benefit from rekindling a relationship with Robert, even if neither of them has talked to him in years.

Noah's father "is a complete mystery." Trevor knows nothing about him, except for that he has an older sister (whom Trevor has also never met) and works as a chef. When they knew each other before, Trevor always called him "Robert," not "dad," because of the risk of their being found out.

The fact that Trevor used to have to hide his relationship with his father also shows that there is new potential for them after the end of apartheid, when it is no longer illegal for them to be related.

Trevor *does* know that Robert is "very Swiss, clean and particular and precise," living "in his own world" and uninterested in marrying because he is so invested in his privacy. He also "hates racism and homogeneity more than anything"—he breaks all the rules of apartheid and opens one of Johannesburg's "first integrated restaurants," which is incredibly successful because people are more curious about one another than they are racist. But neighbors get the government to shut it down.

Like Patricia and Trevor, Robert is fiercely independent; he insists on living according to his own rules and subverting the apartheid system (which also explains why he illegally leased Patricia a room in the first place). His restaurant, like Trevor's birth, proves that no amount of institutional separation or cultural hatred can ultimately succeed in holding groups apart; fundamentally, many people (although not all people) are social, curious, and want to build relationships with those unlike them.

Robert then moves to the integrated neighborhood of Yeoville, where he lives an "extremely frugal" life in a simple house. During his childhood, Trevor visits on Sundays (instead of black church), on his birthday, and on Christmas, which he gets to celebrate like a European (with lights, stockings, and Santa Claus). Robert cooks for Trevor—always the same German meal—but otherwise they mostly sit in silence. Trevor only gets "a few minutes of information a few minutes at a time" every week.

Despite his successful restaurant and white privilege, Robert has little interest in living extravagantly or amassing wealth (even if his Christmas celebrations are luxurious compared to Patricia's family's). Despite his austerity, silence, and fixation on routine, Robert shows his affection simply by making time for Trevor.

Trevor gradually loses contact with his father, who moves away to Cape Town by the time Trevor is 13. Patricia has since married Abel, who turns out to be a controlling alcoholic and does not want Trevor and Patricia having any contact with Robert. Trevor stays busy and starts his comedy career, but always wonders about his father. It is easy to assume that absence means negativity—that Robert does not care—but Patricia always speaks positively about him and insists that Trevor track him down.

Robert's general emotional distance and insistence on privacy make it even harder for Trevor to interpret his absence. It is important to remember that Abel's alcoholism and abuse lurk in the background of Trevor's life from the time he burns down the house onward (in other words, the rest of the book). But Trevor does not address it head-on until the last chapter.

Robert is not in the phone book, so Trevor checks with acquaintances and then the Swiss embassy. The embassy initially refuses to give Trevor any information, because Robert is not listed on his birth certificate, but eventually agrees to forward Trevor's letter on. He gets a response after a few months and, a few months after that, goes to visit the address his father has given him.

While Robert's privacy makes him all the more difficult to contact, his response confirms that this has nothing to do with an attempt to get away from Trevor or his mother; suddenly, Trevor again has access to a mysterious and long-forgotten part of his identity.

When he goes to Cape Town, Trevor is apprehensive, afraid that he will not remember his father's face. But Trevor recognizes him instantly when he opens the door, and they have the same Sunday lunch they used to share years before. Robert pulls out a photo album: it is "a scrapbook of everything [Trevor] had ever done," since the very beginning of his career. Trevor feels "a flood of emotions" and a sudden sense of affirmation: "he'd always been proud of me [...] he was never not my father."

Because of Robert's quietness, meticulousness, and tendency to show his love with actions and routine care for Trevor (rather than words, gifts, or outreach), the photo book is all the more proof that Trevor continues to play an important role in his life. Ironically, even though Trevor knows almost nothing about his father, now his father has a record of almost everything Trevor has ever done.

Trevor decides that his next order of business should be to interview his father; this is a mistake, since he wanted a relationship, not mere facts, and "relationships are built in the silences." When he tries to interview his father, Robert gets defensive and accuses Trevor of "interrogating" him; they decide to spend time together instead, and when Trevor later exclaims that, "all I know is that you're extremely secretive," Robert is glad that "you're getting to know me already."

Through this tension with his father, Trevor learns that love means respecting and cooperating with someone's boundaries, even when it means things like not asking questions about their past. With his father, Trevor has to tamper his curiosity and build a relationship centered on time and effort.

CHAPTER 9

In his historical preface, Noah explains that South Africa's first mixed-race people were born after Dutch colonists raped indigenous hunter-gatherer Khoisan women. Over generations, Khoisan people intermarried with slaves the Dutch imported from around the world, creating the population later known as "colored." Colonists completely destroyed the original Khoisan population, and colored people have largely lost track of their heritage; they are culturally much closer to white Afrikaners than black natives.

Although Trevor has previously explained why he was considered "colored" by the apartheid government, here he introduces an important distinction between looking *"colored" (racially) and* being *"colored" (ethnically). The colored ethnic group is at once every race (because they are so mixed) and a single race (because the apartheid government decides so). They are also simultaneously aligned with the colonizers (because of their linguistic and cultural connections to Afrikaners) and with colonized people (because of their genetic heritage and lower place in the apartheid hierarchy). Like Trevor, they show the illogical basis of apartheid racism.*


The chapter begins with a "giant mulberry tree growing out of someone's front yard" on Trevor and Patricia's street in Eden Park. The neighborhood's other children pick its berries and play together under it; Trevor has no friends there, even though for the first time he is living in a neighborhood where "*everyone* looked like me." He realizes that "it is easier to be an insider as an outsider than to be an outsider as an insider"—in joining a world that is not his own, Noah always finds more acceptance among those he is joining than among his own "tribe."

Although readers might expect that, given apartheid's consistent emphasis on people's appearance over all else, Trevor will fit in best with other people who look like him, his preface makes it clear that there is a distinctive colored culture that he does not share—even though he looks like *he should share it. He is "an insider as an outsider" among black people, who do not assume he is part of their group but later learn that he speaks their language, but "an outsider as an insider" among colored people who assume he will also be culturally colored but then discover that he is not.*

The apartheid government makes colored people "almost-whites" in order to ensure they align with the existing system rather than siding with blacks. "Colored people would get promoted to white" all the time by applying to the government (which would survey them based on appearance) and by disavowing their families and communities. There is also fluidity among the categories of colored, Indian, and even black—people could be promoted and demoted; sometimes white people can even be demoted to colored. And the colored community is incredibly racist, having been taught "that it was black people who were holding them back."

Just like it uses "divide and conquer" to keep Xhosa, Zulu, and other native populations at one another's throats, apartheid gives colored people selective privileges in order to make them focus on their comparative high status relative to blacks (and not their oppression). This fluidity in categories proves that race is not an essential part of someone's being or clear biological category (even if it also means that colored people truly could become "white").

So this makes it "weird" for Trevor, who is "colored by complexion but not by culture." Some colored people hated his blackness (his speaking African languages), while others hate his whiteness (his English education and inability to speak Afrikaans, the predominant colored language).

Because colored people have developed a distinctive culture yet remained defined during apartheid by their relationship to blacks (as superior) and whites (as inferior), they cannot make sense of Trevor, who is at once whiter and blacker than them, plus insufficiently colored.

Once, a colored girl "borrows" Trevor's bicycle so that an older colored kid could steal it—luckily, Trevor's cousin Mlungisi manages to find them and retrieve the bicycle. In fact, Trevor is "bullied all the time." The worst is when some older colored boys start taunting him and throwing mulberries at him under the tree one day while yelling, "Bushie! Bushman!" Trevor runs home in tears and tells his mother, who breaks out into laughter—"out of relief," she promises, because she is relieved to realize the red liquid covering her son is berry juice and not blood.

"Bushman" is a particularly ironic slur for Trevor because his people, the Xhosa, are a Bantu tribe, while colored people are largely descended from Khoisan people (the same group previously called "bushmen"). While this bullying is devastating to him, his mother recognizes the far greater dangers he is liable to face in South Africa, which hints at her deeper fears and motivations for parenting him the way she does.

Abel comes over soon thereafter—he has not been violent with Trevor or his mother yet, but Trevor is already aware of his temper. Patricia urges Trevor not to tell a drunken Abel the story, but he does anyway, knowing he can use Abel's anger to get back at his bullies. It works: Abel and Trevor visit the boys at the tree, and Abel beats the "ringleader" with a stick. At first, Trevor is overjoyed, but soon he sees "the look of terror in the boy's face" and realizes that Abel is "a grown man venting his rage on a twelve-year-old boy." Abel makes the boy come over and apologize, and Trevor recognizes himself in the boy. Later, Abel and Patricia get into a fight, and the boy's father comes over. Abel intimidates him, saying, "Don't fuck with me. I will kill you," and the man leaves.

Trevor recognizes that he intentionally chose to escalate the situation in a way that quickly brought it out of his control; he realizes the true severity of Abel's anger when he identifies with the bully, which likely makes him realize the threat Abel poses to his family, too. Just like with South Africa's government, violence perpetuates itself in a cycle, turning victims into perpetrators, and it becomes clear to Trevor that this is neither a healthy nor a productive way to resolve conflict.

CHAPTER 10

In the chapter's preface, Trevor Noah recalls his mother "trying to teach me about women," a little bit at a time, whenever she can get in a word: it does not matter if his wife makes more money than him, he should not force "his wife [to] compete with his mother," and he should look women in the eye. And there are plenty of lectures about sex, too.

Patricia is adamant about teaching Trevor how to love people properly, both through these lectures (including her selfless insistence that Trevor put his wife before herself) and also through modeling healthy, generous, non-possessive, and non-antagonistic love to Trevor. Even though her own relationship with Abel is incredibly unhealthy (as the reader will later learn in detail), she sees that loving properly is central to living a fulfilling life and pushing others to improve.

In his new school, Trevor experiences Valentine's Day for the first time—Maryvale never celebrated it. He is confused at all the girls asking, "Who's your valentine?" One proposes he ask Maylene, a girl he walks home from school with—the family has since left Eden Park, and Trevor and Maylene live furthest from school. He does not have a crush about her, but she is the school's only colored girl, and the white girls insist, so he convinces himself he likes her and follows the standard process whereby his friends ask her friends.

Trevor is as confused by Valentine's Day as he is by the students' ritual of dividing themselves up based on race, and so he goes along with the first by means of the second, accepting that he is supposed to like Maylene simply because she is the only other person who looks like him.


Walking home from school one day, already knowing she would say yes, Trevor asks Maylene and they kiss—his first kiss—in front of McDonald's. He spends the week in an frenzy, getting her a card, flowers, and a teddy bear. On Valentine's Day, it turns out she "can't be your girlfriend anymore" because another student, Lorenzo, has asked her too, "and I can't have two valentines." Trevor gives Maylene the gifts and feels horrible, but also feels like "this makes sense." Lorenzo is white, popular, nice, attractive, and stupid, so Trevor "stood no chance."

When Trevor chooses how to love based on other people's expectations, his Valentine's Day falls apart; in fact, Maylene rejects him precisely because she also follows the social script about what she is supposed to value in a partner (whiteness and status). While Trevor sees how such romantic scripts and expectations disadvantage him, this episode also shows how children are socialized into them from a young age.


CHAPTER 11

In the brief preface Trevor explains that his mother is an expert at conserving gas: she turns **the car** off at every stoplight, coasts her way through every downhill stretch, and even has Trevor push the car "six inches at a time" when they are stuck in bad traffic. He just hopes none of the kids from school can recognize him.

Yet again, what is humiliating in the moment becomes hilarious (and even admirable) in retrospect. Patricia conserves gas not only because the family is poor, but also because of her more general attitude toward expenses: she decides what is absolutely necessary and refuses to spend on anything else. Of course, it is worth remembering that she does *deeply value the trips and adventures they take in the car—which is yet another reason to stretch the gas as much as possible.*


For high school, Trevor goes to a "Model C school"—part public, part private, and "a near-perfect microcosm of post-apartheid South Africa," with students of all race and classes "as integrated as they could be given that apartheid had just ended." Students still largely separate out by race and color, but mostly because these correspond to the places where they live and activities they participate in.

Interestingly, Trevor notes that his high school segregates by place *and only by race as a secondary effect; this shows the mechanism by which apartheid-era rules continue to structure South African society under democracy: for the most part, people still live in the same places and around the same people as they did during apartheid; and integration does not happen overnight even by putting different people in the same place.*

Trevor has no obvious place to go: the colored kids hate him "for being too black," and the white kids accept him but are too preoccupied with "things that required money," so he hangs out with "the poor black kids" from the townships, who hang out separately on the weekends.

Like in middle school, even though he is the poster-child for integration, Trevor is forced to choose a group and ends up with the black kids, which makes sense given his family and upbringing.

Trevor remains an "outsider" and, to make money, becomes "the tuck-shop guy." He is also "the patron saint of detention," late every day because he has to walk so far to school, to the point where it becomes a running joke during the assembly where the prefect names the students with detention. And Trevor is still the fastest, most shameless kid in school, so he is always the first to the tuck shop (the cafeteria) after assembly. Soon, other students realize that they can have Trevor buy them food instead of waiting in the long line, and he starts taking orders every assembly. In fact, he has too many orders, and decides to only take five "high bidders" per day. He manages to pay off his lunches and spend his original lunch money on a bus back home.

Just like his mother decided to play by her own rules during the apartheid era, Trevor decides to shape his own social life rather than letting his lack of a clear place in the school's social scene turn him into a pariah. He takes a tongue-in-cheek pride in his detentions and turns his outsider status into a money-making opportunity at lunchtime. This points once again to his ability to connect with a wide variety of people, regardless of background or race, and foreshadows the informal businesses he starts in the coming chapters.


Trevor remains "a cultural chameleon," like "the weed guy [who] is always welcome at the party" even though he is an outsider. His main tool is humor—he can "drop in, pass out the snacks, tell a few jokes," and move on to the next group. He is simultaneously welcome everywhere and ultimately "all by [him]self."

Trevor uses humor just like he uses language: it allows him to become what he previously called "an insider as an outsider." Just like with his name, he can be anything only because he is nothing in particular; his freedom is both a blessing and a curse.


CHAPTER 12

In the preface, Trevor Noah insists that he has no regret for anything he has done, but plenty of "regret for the things I didn't do." People should fear regret, not failure and rejection, which are at least answers to the questions regret always leaves open.

This short introduction recalls Trevor's commentary about his feelings on burning down the white family's house; just as taking responsibility and moving on is a better way to deal with failure than wallowing in pain and regret, being willing to accept failure is a better way to deal with uncertainty than wallowing in indecision and guaranteeing regret for oneself. Indeed, as Patricia's attitude proves so saliently, approaching decisions with a willingness to take responsibility and/or fail can prevent people from feeling apprehension or fear in the first place.

Trevor is an ugly high schooler, with horrible acne, no money for a haircut, and, thanks to his mother, clothes three sizes too big that he never grows into. He quickly learns that "cool guys get girls, and funny guys get to hang out with the cool guys with their girls." He would "upset the natural order of things" if he tries anything.

Although he manages to be one of the "funny guys" despite his outsider status and self-proclaimed hideousness, Trevor feels that he should continue to fall in line with other people's romantic expectations and be grateful for his middling place in the hierarchy (somewhat like colored people were expected to feel grateful under apartheid for not being black).

Trevor becomes friends with Johanna, who is popular, and her beautiful but shy friend Zaheera. He always makes them laugh and develops "the hugest crush on Zaheera," so he crafts a "foolproof" plan: he will become her best friend and, after three years, she will realize that he is "the guy I was supposed to be with all along," like in the movies. She confides in him about other boys and they start talking on the phone every day after school. And then, at the beginning of the next term, she abruptly immigrates to the United States—and Johanna tells Trevor that Zaheera had "such a huge crush on you." Trevor feels "three successive waves of heartbreak" and a profound regret at never asking Zaheera out.

In fact, Trevor's foolproof plan works perfectly, but he is so convinced that he will fail that he never tries to talk to her about his feelings. If Fufi taught him that love is not possession and Maylene taught him about how social expectations govern relationships and where he stands in the school hierarchy, then Zaheera teaches him both the virtues of honesty even when he expects failure and the ultimate unreliability of the same romantic expectations and scripts he learned about on Valentine's Day.

CHAPTER 13

In his preface, Trevor Noah explains that his family manages to move into a white neighborhood by buying a house from the one family "that Does Not Give a Fuck." (Every white neighborhood has one.) They end up in Highlands North, a middle-class area where Trevor is literally "the only black kid." (Most of the residents are Jews, who "don't flee. They're done fleeing. They've already fled.") In this new neighborhood, it is difficult to make friends because "everyone lived behind walls," with the houses closer to "fancy maximum-security prison[s]," surrounded by electric wire. The only friends Trevor can find are the children of domestic workers.

Just as Patricia speculatively and prematurely bought her way into a comfortable suburban colored neighborhood, she manages to move her family into a white neighborhood where black families are not expected to live. While this shows that she continues to seek the best for her family even against social expectations, it also leaves Trevor isolated and confused; he needs an invitation behind a white family's wall in order to make any friends at all, and he will never get that invitation because he is not white.

Trevor makes one close friend at his new school: Teddy, who is also "naughty as shit" and plays pranks with him. Teddy's mother works in a white family's house a 40-minute walk away—and they walk "all over Johannesburg together," for hours. They start stealing liquor-filled chocolates from the mall, but one day, a cop sees them and brings a dozen others to chase after them. They make it back to Trevor's neighborhood, where he knows he can squeeze his way through a hole in the fence at the end of a dead-end street and escape. However, Teddy goes the other way. Trevor squeezes through the fence, goes home, and waits for Teddy—who never shows up and does not even come to school the next day.

Although Trevor apparently learns to stop playing with fire, he remains "naughty as shit" and, predictably, gets himself into trouble again. It is telling that a dozen cops chase the two boys for shoplifting, rather than simply ensuring they leave the mall: it suggests that they see Teddy and Trevor as despicable criminals, rather than unruly children, and it is doubtful that they would have received the same treatment if they were white.

Teddy's parents visit Patricia and explain that he has been arrested for shoplifting—Patricia insists Trevor must have been involved, but he denies it and believes he has gotten away with a "solid alibi." The next day, Trevor gets called to the principal's office, where the principal, three mall cops, and a teacher are waiting. They explain that Teddy has been expelled and ask if, as Teddy's best friend, Trevor knows anything about the matter. He denies it—and then the police pull out security camera footage. Trevor is shocked; they play the video back and it clearly shows him, shoplifting with Teddy.

Expulsion is an extreme punishment for shoplifting, and it is likely to significantly affect Teddy's future, which shows for the first time in the book how the legal system's bias against blacks contributes to cycles of poverty and violence (the following chapters show this in much more detail). While Teddy covers for Trevor, Patricia does not—as always, she puts honesty and responsibility before convenience or blind loyalty.

Then the teacher asks Trevor if he "know[s] of any white kids that Teddy hangs out with." Trevor is confused, but soon realizes what's going on: in the black-and-white footage, Trevor looks white, while Teddy looks black. The adults ask Trevor over and over if he knows who the white accomplice could possibly be—but never see that it is obviously him. They are "so fucked by their own construct of race that they could not see that the white person they were looking for was sitting right in front of them."

This episode shows Trevor how the rest of the world sees race (which is unsurprisingly different from his more nuanced perspective, given that he learned about race's fuzziness early on). They are so fixated on the color of the skin on the tape that they neither look past color at Trevor's actual face nor realize that the black-and-white footage distorts color. In rare fashion, Trevor gets away with crime because he isn't *white.*

CHAPTER 14

Noah's preface summarizes South Africa's linguistic situation. There are eleven official languages, with English and Afrikaans included by default, as the languages of power and the white minority; Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, and Ndebele are major native languages; while Swazi, Tsonga, Venda, Sotho, and Pedi are less widespread. There are "dozens more" local African languages too small "to demand recognition." People are constantly communicating in multiple languages, sometimes at the same time, translating as needed and somehow managing to keep the country functioning.

South Africa's linguistic chaos reflects both its remarkable diversity (with each local language officially recognized) and its need for political integration (which leads business and government to rely on English). All communication is cultural negotiation, and while Trevor speaks a remarkable array of languages, he can still by no means understand everything said in his country.

Trevor has "a mini-empire" by the end of high school: using the computer he convinces his mother to buy him "for school," he pirates CDs to sell at school. He also looks at plenty of pornographic photos.

Just like he did to become the "tuck shop guy," Trevor exploits his outsider-insider status and business savvy to continue making money and friends at the same time.

Prom is approaching. All Trevor knows about this "strange ritual" is that it is usually when people lose their virginity, and as usual he does not expect to have a date for it.

Trevor also remains uncomfortable about his romantic prospects as another high school "ritual" forces him to interact with girls.

Trevor has two friends involved in his CD scheme. One is Tim, who (like Teddy) is the son of a domestic worker, but goes to "a proper ghetto school" called Northview, where he sells the CDs. Tim is also a "real hustler" and a habitual liar. One day, Tim takes Trevor to a middle-of-nowhere black settlement called Hammanskraal, for a talent show and insists he wear his Timberland boots—the "only decent piece of clothing [Trevor] owned," which all his peers envied. At the talent show, Tim announces "a rapper all the way from America" and forces Trevor onstage, because "they've already paid me the money." Trevor refuses, but Tim insists that he is doing it for a girl, and also that "these people don't speak English," so Trevor can say whatever he wants. Trevor makes up rough lyrics as he goes along, and the crowd goes wild.

Tim's scheme playing Trevor off as an American rapper shows how much of status and power are arbitrary: Trevor has the right boots and speaks English, so people will believe he is both famous and American. Tim puts profit and self-interest above all else, even (or especially) among his "friends," whereas Trevor strives to combine money and people them in mutually beneficial ways, without taking advantage of the people with whom he does business.


Another time, Tim comes to Trevor's house and they chat about the dance—Tim promises he can get Trevor a date (in exchange for a better commission on the CDs and some free music). Trevor agrees but insists "it's not going to happen." Tim promises "the most beautiful girl you've ever seen," who will make Trevor "a superstar."

Trevor already knows not to fully trust Tim, whose promises tend to be too good to be true, but he ends up taking Tim's deal precisely because he still does not believe it possible for him to have a beautiful date to the dance.

Astonishingly, Tim shows up a few weeks later with good news—even though Trevor is sure he is lying. Tim takes Trevor into Johannesburg, where they see a girl leaning over her balcony ("the girl's sister," whom it later turns out Tim is hoping to sleep with) and then meet a "really, really enormous, fat woman" inside ("her older sister," one of three). Babiki, Trevor's date, comes home after ten minutes, and Trevor is stunned, "dumbfounded," with "no idea how to talk to a girl that beautiful." Tim introduces them, helps them coordinate logistics for the dance, and escorts an ecstatic Trevor out.

Astonishingly, for once Tim follows through with his promise, and Trevor finally gets the shot at romance that he has been waiting for; for the first time, he feels like any other normal student rather than the outsider-insider he usually is at school. Of course, Tim is also thinking about his own self-interest, and he coordinates the entire interaction between Trevor and Babiki, which soon proves transformational in their relationship.


Tim and Trevor visit Babiki's family some more in the next few weeks; they are from the smaller Pedi tribe and try to look rich, buying expensive clothes despite their poverty, which is not uncommon in South Africa. Trevor and Babiki never see one another alone, but he is "in heaven," feeling like he finally has a girlfriend. But with the dance nearing, he begins to worry. For one, he lacks a car—Abel agrees to loan him one that he is fixing up, and then, after Babiki comes over for a visit, Tim persuades Abel to loan Trevor his BMW.

Babiki and her family cope with their poverty in the opposite way as Trevor and his mother: they buy expensive things to project an image of wealth but lack money for their necessities (while Patricia refuses to buy Trevor new clothes even though they can afford books and live in a comfortable suburban home). Trevor fawns over Babiki from a distance, even though they actually do not know each other, and (much like on Valentine's Day) sets about making preparations for what he imagines as a perfect realization of his peers' romantic scripts.

Trevor also needs new clothes, especially since Babiki is so fashion-obsessed; he has terrible taste but convinces his mom to pay for a new outfit. He enlists Sizwe, his other CD reseller, to give him a makeover. He buys one expensive leather jacket and various cheap articles to round out the outfit. Then, Sizwe sets out to replace Trevor's unruly afro with cornrows—first, the woman at the salon has to chemically relax his hair, which feels like "liquid fire" and leaves burns all over his scalp. But it works and, six hours later, he has cornrows and is delighted to look in the mirror. At home, his mom exclaims, "they turned my baby boy into a pretty little girl!" She teases him and asks if he is gay, but the whole family approves.

Even if he stumbles awkwardly through it, Trevor's makeover suggests that he might be able to make the transition from outsider to popular kid. By finally paying attention to his appearance, he also begins to empathize more seriously with women, especially when he burns his scalp with the chemical relaxer. Meanwhile, his mother's jokes serve to remind Trevor that they have always prioritized experiences and knowledge over external appearances and material wealth.

On "the big night," Trevor goes to get the BMW keys from Abel, who is completely drunk. First, Abel makes Trevor buy him beer; then, he refuses to give him the BMW and leaves him with "the shitty Mazda." Trevor gets to Babiki's house an hour late, and she is beautiful but furious. They then get lost and spend more than an hour driving around in circles. Finally, they arrive, but Babiki refuses to follow Trevor inside. Trevor finds Sizwe, who brings a crowd of 20 other boys out to gawk at Babiki "like she was an animal at the zoo." Trevor is mortified and starts drinking.

Abel's drunken recklessness again derails Trevor's life and erodes any remaining trust between them; just like on Valentine's Day, everything imaginable goes wrong despite Trevor's meticulous preparation. Worse than merely being excluded from the normal prom festivities, his failure becomes a spectacle for the whole school, solidifying his status as an outsider. Of course, he does not yet wonder what Babiki must feel, showing the limits of his empathy.

Sometime later, Sizwe tries one last time to bring Babiki inside and instead tells Trevor she definitely does not speak English. And Trevor realizes that he has never even talked directly to her, that he does not even know what it means for him to have a "girlfriend." Their communication "was always through Tim," who speaks Pedi. Babiki's sisters speak English, but she does not, and Trevor is used to missing parts of any conversation in South Africa—he remembers everything in English, no matter what language it happens in first. He realizes that Babiki "probably owed Tim a favor," and is "probably terrified" after being stuck in an hour in the dark with a man she does not know and taken to a place full of strangers who cannot speak her language.

For the only time in the book, Trevor's language abilities completely fail, reflecting South Africa's residual ethnic fragmentation after apartheid, especially because multiple generations of people never had the opportunity to interact outside their language group. Now, Trevor sees his night in a completely different light, imagining it from Babiki's perspective and realizing that his innocuous mistakes probably dredged up her deepest fears simply because living in South Africa often means confronting the constant possibility of violent assault.

Trevor tries "every language I knew" and asks everyone he can find if they speak Pedi—nobody does. He spends the rest of the night in the parking lot and drives Babiki home in silence—whereupon "she leaned over and gave me a kiss. Like, a real kiss, a proper kiss." Trevor is baffled and waves her goodbye.

Just when Trevor convinces himself that Babiki probably resents and fears him, she gives him a kiss that shows him how little he understands about romance.

CHAPTER 15

In his preface, Noah notes that the history of the Holocaust is a central part of a German high school education, like the British Empire in the current British school system. But South Africa, like the United States, does not critically teach about its past: there are "facts, but not many, and never the emotional or moral dimension."

The kind of curriculum Trevor sees as predominant in places like South Africa and the United States contrasts strongly with the kind of education his mother gave him: for her, his ability to think independently was the only thing that mattered.

Three Chinese kids start at Trevor's school while he is in the ninth grade: Bolo (a nickname), Bruce Lee (his actual name), and John (who "was just John"). Bolo is busy starting his own business, selling pirated PlayStation games and CDs with a white kid named Daniel. But Bolo and Daniel are afraid to confront the black kids, who promise to pay later but never do, so they enlist Trevor's help. Daniel helps Trevor improve his computer and then, when he is ready to graduate, gives Trevor his expensive CD writer.

Trevor again benefits from his ability to bridge different cultures and ethnicities, which allows him to become a middleman between the school's black majority and Daniel and Bolo. Whereas Tim's deals are usually thinly veiled attempts to take advantage of Trevor, Daniel legitimately helps Trevor out, offering an opportunity that promises to benefit them mutually and clearly investing in him personally as well as financially (as evidenced by the gift of his CD writer).

Trevor now has everything he needs to control the bootleg business top-to-bottom, but he also has zero music knowledge, since he is only allowed to listen to church music. To remedy this, he starts listening to the CDs while he burns them; many are black American albums. Sizwe gives Trevor some ideas that prove quite successful, such as making a compilation album, or having the tracks fade together.

The fact that American music is so popular in Trevor's world suggests that South Africans are beginning to develop a transnational concept of black identity after apartheid, looking to African-Americans (whose struggle against slavery and segregation is in some ways analogous to the struggle against apartheid) in order to make sense of themselves.

Trevor is making 500 rand a week, a "dream" salary, which is "the most liberating thing in the world" because now he can afford *choice*. He goes to McDonald's—which is all the rage in South Africa—and soon gets addicted: "McDonald's *is* America." He refuses to eat much else. In the era before cellphones, he even buys a cordless phone, which lets him talk to his friends on his walk to and from McDonald's.

After growing up beholden to his mother's financial control, Trevor finally gets his own income and a taste of freedom. His McDonald's obsession, like his budding interest in black American music, shows how American culture becomes increasingly dominant throughout the world in conjunction with economic globalization. In a sense, Trevor's pride in his income is like his pride in tasting "America"—both symbolize rising from poverty to material success.

Trevor has Daniel to thank for his newfound comforts; Daniel's generosity shows "how important it is to empower the dispossessed and the disenfranchised in the wake of oppression." Daniel has access to all the resources that Trevor and his family have always lacked, and by getting those resources (the CD writer), Trevor has managed to succeed where "talent alone would have gotten [him] nowhere."

Trevor offers a powerful argument against thinking about success and talent in purely individual terms: people also always have to consider the context of resources, knowledge, and social connections that make success possible and talent visible. Daniel's relationship with Trevor shows the towering difference between ending apartheid and repairing its damage, making it formally legal for blacks to succeed and actually giving them the resources necessary to do it.

Sizwe soon recommends that Trevor start DJing. Sizwe lives in the dense, dangerous, and hard-partying shantytown of Alexandra; in Alex, unless "someone gets shot or a bottle gets broken on someone's face [...] it wasn't a party." Most DJs are stuck with vinyl, so can only play for a few hours, but with his computer, Trevor can play all night. He and Sizwe throw Alexandra's biggest party on New Year's Eve and immediately build a reputation. While the white kids take a gap year to travel, Trevor takes one to sell CDs by day and DJ parties by night.

Alexandra represents the absolute worst conditions in which urban black South Africans were forced to live during and after apartheid. By combining the technology and training Daniel gives him with Sizwe's social connections and his own entrepreneurial spirit, Trevor becomes something of a local celebrity and the ultimate outsider-insider.

Trevor and Sizwe decide to form a dance crew to teach people new moves mentioned in their music, and the best dancer among their friends is a guy named Hitler. Hitler is incredible, like "a jellyfish if it could walk on land," and is "incredibly handsome." He "almost always" wins the neighborhood dance competitions and becomes the dance crew's centerpiece; the whole neighborhood chants, "*Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler*!"

Trevor and Sizwe continue to expand their operation and, with Hitler's dancing adding a visual spectacle to their crew, they become an important rallying point bringing the entire neighborhood together. Although it probably jumps out immediately at the reader, nobody in Alexandra appears to see anything strange about a teenager named Hitler.

The legendary dancer is named Hitler because, since the earliest days of colonial South Africa, black people were forced to take a European name "that white people could pronounce." They often choose these at random, from the Bible or the news. This is "a case of the West reaping what it has sown"—black South Africans really have no idea who Hitler is at this point in time, and mostly think of him as someone so powerful that he almost made the Allies lose their war. He "must be the toughest guy of all time," and South Africans want to seem tough, so they name their children "Hitler."

South Africans see Hitler as the enemy of their enemy, without realizing that he was also responsible for the Holocaust and the inspiration for their enemy (since apartheid was partially modeled after Nazi Germany). Trevor sees the name "Hitler" as evidence of colonialism's intellectual laziness: it neither wants to learn Africans' real names nor wants to teach him the real history based on which they are expected to choose names.

At Trevor's comparatively sophisticated school, they learned some facts about World War II, but nothing about Hitler's racist policies (on which apartheid was largely modeled). People think in terms of their own history, and "Hitler is not the worst thing a black South African can imagine" compared to the Europeans who colonized their people. Westerners often "insist that the Holocaust was the worst atrocity in human history" but forget about colonialism, which is different only because it lacks detailed records, which the Nazis kept religiously. For Africans, Hitler is "just another strongman from the history books."

Trevor forces the reader to see that their likely bias toward thinking in terms of Western history makes them just as provincial and ignorant as South Africans who never learn about it. It is useless to rank horrific events from history; saying that the Holocaust was definitively the worst atrocity across all time and place is actually papering over the numerous genocides, past and present, committed by Western countries who still retain their political power and whose victims continue to be silenced.

As the dance crew multiplies Trevor and Sizwe's success, they begin playing more gigs in the suburbs, for wealthier black families but also white people. And they soon get booked to play a "cultural program" at a private Jewish school. They start their set, and ten minutes in, Trevor announces, "Give it up and make some noise for HIIIIIITTTTLLLLEERRRRRRRRR!!!"

After Trevor, Sizwe, Hitler, and the crew gain a following, they become a token of township culture for wealthier South Africans who want to know what is happening in places like Alexandra but never actually go there. Ironically enough, Trevor actually still lives in a comfortable white suburb like the ones for which he is now representing Alexandra.

The room falls silent as Hitler and the crew start their routine; a teacher unplugs Trevor's microphone and calls him a "horrible, disgusting, vile creature." Trevor realizes the problem: Hitler's signature, gyrating, erotic dance move. But this is "part of our [African] culture." Trevor tells the woman to calm down, and she says that "you people are disgusting." Clearly, she is racist, Trevor concludes, and they continue arguing. She promises that "my people" will defeat "people like you," and Trevor assumes she is talking about white people, since "Jews in South Africa are just white people." He announces that "now we have Nelson Mandela on our side!" The woman is horribly confused, and the crew dances their way out of the school, chanting, "*Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler!*"

Trevor and the Jewish teacher's misunderstanding is comical because both believe they are standing up for the oppressed: the teacher thinks that Trevor is idolizing the Holocaust by yelling "Go Hitler!" (even though that is just his friend's name) and Trevor thinks the teacher is proclaiming white supremacy and insulting their blackness, rather than their reference to Hitler. This symmetrical cultural misunderstanding, based on a symmetrical lack of education about the other group, illustrates the extent to which South African society remains sharply divided after apartheid, and how the education system fails to help bridge those divisions.

CHAPTER 16

In his brief preface, Noah outlines the history of Alexandra, which was originally a white man's farm. But this farmer sold his land to blacks before apartheid, when blacks were barred from owning property, and the area gradually filled with squatters before and during apartheid. Unlike Soweto, which has continually grown since its foundation, Alex is completely surrounded by white suburbs and so "pinned in on all sides." It is extraordinarily dense and has not changed—nor will it.

While the apartheid regime intentionally designed Soweto to be a slum, Alexandra came about accidentally, when apartheid laws were overlaid on preexisting geographical divisions. Because it is "pinned in," it lacks Soweto's sense of aspiration: there is no space for people to expand and no hope of living a better life in the neighborhood.

Sizwe is "one of those people who brought out the best in everybody," which makes him immensely popular. He lives in Alexandra, but Trevor seldom goes there until after high school, when suddenly being from "the hood" is "a badge of honor," with American hip-hop taking off. Trevor is curious, so accompanies Sizwe one day. To get into Alex, they have to pass one of Johannesburg's wealthiest neighborhoods, then an industrial belt, and then a chaotic market next to a bus station and a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

With American culture becoming an important way for South Africans to take pride in blackness as a unified identity (separate from the ethnic or tribal identities that were dominant before and during apartheid), "authentic" black identity becomes located in the experience of inner-city poverty, which Alexandra best represents in South Africa.

Alexandra itself is "a hive of constant human activity," with a chaotic energy that "erupts periodically in epic acts of violence and crazy parties." The buildings are rudimentary, basic sanitation is lacking, and "trash is everywhere," often burning. The smells of food, sewage, motor oil, and the ubiquitous goats mix together, just like the residents' various languages and the different genres of music that are constantly playing. It is "a complete sensory overload." The area also has a geographical order: first avenue is next to the bus station; second through fifth avenues are nice, formal houses; past that is "really shitty"; then the government housing projects, where "you never wanted to go"; and finally, across the river, there is "East Bank, the newest, nicest part of the hood," full of two-bedroom houses, where Sizwe lives and Trevor spends plenty of time hanging out and "shooting the shit."

Trevor points out that Alexandra is simultaneously chaotic and ordered, with its "complete sensory overload" actually the product of thousands of people going about their ordinary lives virtually on top of one another and the whole neighborhood actually following a clear spatial hierarchy. It is also a microcosm of post-apartheid black South African life as a whole, and Trevor's delight at being there is in part a delight at participating in this chaotic mosaic. Trevor feels a sense of belonging there that he has struggled to find throughout his entire childhood, even though he looks colored (while everyone else is black) and lives in a comfortable white suburb.

After high school, Trevor moves out of the house with his mother's encouragement because Abel is too "toxic." Trevor needs to make money to afford university tuition, so he decides to sell CDs in Alexandra, where minibus drivers buy their music (which they value as a way to attract customers) and everything is incredibly cheap—except cheese. Cheese is a particularly important sign of wealth, and Sizwe and his friends are "cheese boys," to their chagrin. They would argue with people from the poorer parts of Alex about "who was hood and who was cheese."

Abel's violence continues to create turmoil in the background as Trevor comes of age, giving him a reason to want to stay away from the family and pushing him to seek out a completely independent life all at once; the time he spends in Alex could be seen as a reaction to this turmoil. The new pride in the "hood" creates a huge paradox: everyone wants to make money, but nobody wants to be "cheese." While Trevor clearly thinks it is important to dignify and humanize people living in poverty, this borders on a counterproductive valorization of poverty. But it also suggests that Sizwe and Trevor may not gain much (besides cheese) from being in a slightly better socioeconomic situation.

However, "cheese boys" like Sizwe and his crew are "in a uniquely fucked situation" because they have seen the outside world, gotten educated, but never acquired the resources to leave their neighborhoods. After apartheid, unemployment skyrocketed because a system of slavery gets replaced with a minimum wage. This hits poor black youth the hardest, and so many end up with nothing to do but hang out on the corner.

Indeed, the complete lack of economic opportunities after apartheid means that the first generation to get an education cannot translate that education into socioeconomic progress because—like Trevor with Daniel's CD writer—they need some opportunity to make use of. The ability to fend for oneself—the kind of education that Trevor's mother ensured he got—becomes much more important than having gone to school. In pointing out that unemployment increased after apartheid, Trevor is by no means arguing that apartheid was better for black workers, as some white South Africans have tried to insist—rather, he is pointing out that apartheid was completely dependent on unfree and usually unpaid labor, and that an entirely new market had to grow afterwards, virtually out of nothing, to serve the next generation.

In Alexandra "there is a very fine line between civilian and criminal"; friends become gangsters and gangsters become friends, and crime is ubiquitous in varying degrees because, in short, "crime cares." It gives people who have nothing else a way to support themselves, and it "doesn't discriminate." Initially, Trevor's "life of crime" is just selling the pirated CDs, which barely counts as crime at all in Alex. He, Sizwe, and their crew sell CDs to the minibus drivers and hang out in a converted shipping container that has a payphone inside. Like Tim, Sizwe is a clever businessman, so starts selling to the bus drivers on credit (with interest) and loaning out money to people in the neighborhood.

Just as under apartheid, the "fine line" between legal and criminal behavior is ultimately relatively meaningless: the state is full of criminals, most criminals are never punished, and desperate times call for desperate measures. Trevor wants the reader to see that, just as his mother taught him, ethical and personal rules are more important than legal ones (as long as one knows how to avoid legal consequences). This does not mean doing whatever one wants, but rather living by principles *instead of by social demands and expectations. In this context, when no work is available in the formal sector, it seems unreasonable to refuse informal work on moral grounds.*

For instance, a young guy is trying to buy a DVD player from a crackhead for 120 rand—Sizwe gives the crackhead 50 and gets the young guy, who works at a shoe store, to give him a pair of Nikes with his employee discount, then sells the Nikes for 200. While none of this is strictly legal, nobody asks questions. A stolen car radio? Sure, because "white people have insurance." Even Trevor's devout mother once bought a bunch of burger patties, which were definitely stolen, from "some guy at work."

Indeed, even Trevor's strict mother took advantage of a no-questions-asked bargain, choosing her own necessity over someone else's property rights. (Arguably, South Africa's history and extent of inequality calls into question the very legitimacy of property rights that whites gained through illegal expropriation and others' slave labor during apartheid.)

Every day, Trevor takes the bus into Alex with Sizwe and sets up shop at his house. They eat breakfast and take orders from bus drivers while burning some CDs, sell those CDs when the drivers come back around, and spend the rest of the day making deals, getting from place to place by jumping on minibuses for free to chat about what music to buy. The lunch rush is busy, and in the afternoons moms come by, preferring to buy their household goods and get loans from "upstanding, well-spoken East Bank boys" rather than crackheads and violent loan sharks.

Although Trevor, Sizwe, and their friends have their hustle perfected to a science, there is no clear distinction between their work and leisure, or their paid and unpaid time; rather, they are constantly looking out for opportunities and taking advantage of whatever they can get their hands on. In fact, being "cheese" helps them succeed in business because it lends them credibility with adults, even if other people their age still valorize the "hood" over the "cheese."

Trevor, Sizwe, and the guys also use loans as an excuse to hang out around the women's houses, meet their daughters, and invite them out for parties—which these girls usually would not be allowed to attend. Then they could set up "the girl, who was usually thrilled to escape her mother's prison" with a guy who would bring them beer, which they would then resell.

Just like Tim set up Trevor and Babiki for prom, Trevor and Sizwe serve as middlemen for relationships as well as secondhand goods, using their reputations and relative class status in Alexandra to connect people in exchange for an opportunity to profit—which always remains their goal, even though it does not seem to be improving their lives very much.

At one point, they have "around 10,000 rand in capital" in addition to plenty of goods and cash flowing in and out, which Trevor records in a spreadsheet. The big sales happen after everyone comes home from work, wanting to buy electronics or sell stuff they had stolen. At night, they drink beer and hang out, guessing what kind of guns they can hear in the distance, before going to their DJ gigs or returning home.

With Trevor and Sizwe's business becoming well-established (and Trevor's computer skills, which he learned from Daniel, and bookkeeping skills, which he learned from his secretary mother, coming in handy) it seems that they have found a place for themselves in the neighborhood and become a rare success story amidst Alexandra's general desolation.

After two years of this hustle, Trevor is no closer to affording tuition—although he always feels like he is working, it is actually "maximal effort put into minimal gain," like wasting time on the internet instead of reading books. Alexandra's real draws are the acceptance—there are few colored people there, but "the hood doesn't judge"—and the comforts of never having to "ask yourself any of the big questions" about your life or goals. Since there is always someone doing worse and someone doing marginally better, "you don't feel like you need to do more."

Trevor's original motivation was making enough to afford college tuition (a reminder that higher education is also inaccessible to most black South Africans after apartheid) but instead he gets caught up in the day-to-day ups and downs of profit and losses rather than saving anything up in the long term.

And, of course, there is the hood's "wonderful sense of community," because everyone knows everyone and eagerly pitches in to help those who need it. For the most part, "the township polices itself as well." However, it also limits people's ambition—one of Trevor and Sizwe's friends gets a job at a clothing store, for which everyone teases him. He soon gets fired for stealing, though, and Trevor is convinced "he did it on purpose [...] so that he'd get accepted back into the group again." It is hard to leave, but when it's time, it's time.

What Trevor did find in Alexandra, it becomes clear, was a sense of comfort and belonging, but only because Alexandra unconditionally accepted and never challenged him; whereas Soweto's community is aspirational, full of individuals mutually supporting one another's efforts to improve their lives, homes, and families, Alexandra's is supportive only because of shared desperation.

Trevor is DJing a party in a nice black suburb near Alexandra; the police come in on a noise complaint, brandishing machine guns and ordering Trevor to shut down the music. But he is using Windows 95, which is so incredibly slow to shut down that the cop overreacts and shoots Trevor's computer monitor. This does not shut off the music, but it does send the crowd into a frenzy, and the cops decide to tear gas the party for good measure. Trevor's hard drive is destroyed, he loses all his music, and his crew cannot sell CDs anymore.

Even though the police have absolutely no reason to carry machine guns or destroy Trevor's computer, he has to deal with the consequences of their overreactions, which derail the core of his business and show that, although the police are no longer massacring blacks to preserve apartheid, they still have unlimited and arbitrary power to oppress South Africa's native peoples.

Soon thereafter, Trevor buys a camera from a local who steals things from people's baggage at the airport. He sees a white family's vacation photos and feels horrible; he recognizes that suffering is easy to perpetuate only because people do not see those they hurt, on the other end. He feels too guilty to ever sell the camera.

Probably in large part thanks to his mother, Trevor's sense of empathy and morality kicks in. When he sees the humans behind his crime, he realizes that there are both constructive and destructive ways to make money (which is not the same as the difference between legal and criminal ones) and decides to choose the constructive path. While many people in Alexandra have few other options, he is there by choice, so he has no excuse to continue making his money by hurting people.

One night, a rival crew from Soweto invites Hitler for a dance-off against their best dancer. He loses, and the party dissolves into a fight. Trevor's crew takes a minibus home, but it gets pulled over, and the cops find a gun inside. Nobody knows whose it is; a cop hits them all and calls them "trash," "dogs from Alex [...] bunch of fucking hoodlums." He insists that they are going to jail, and they realize he actually wants a bribe, but they do not have any money, so they actually end up in jail—even though they are on a public bus and the gun doesn't belong to them.

As in most of the world, the police are above the law, so function effectively as an organized crime syndicate with the backing of the state. Here, they take advantage of (and perpetuate) the stereotype of poor black men as criminals in order to prey on Trevor and his friends—whom, oddly, they insult for being from a poor neighborhood and assume will have enough money to pay a bribe.

In jail, when Trevor tells the cop he is from Highlands North, the cop is baffled, calls him "rich boy," and tries to get him to rat out his friends. The next day, a friend's dad posts their "bail" (which is really a bribe, since there is no formal arrest or paperwork). The boys return to their usual lives but realize that they are not really from the hood, just following its way of life because they cannot leave—except Trevor.

The cop's perceptions of Trevor are based entirely on external factors—his race and where he lives—and not at all on his behavior, character, or decisions. Accordingly, when Trevor mentions he is from a wealthier neighborhood, the cop immediately assumes that Trevor is not like his friends and can be turned against them. In fact, this difference goes no deeper than the fact that Trevor can choose not to spend time in Alex (but says nothing about his socioeconomic status, likelihood to be a criminal, or relationship to the other boys).

CHAPTER 17

In the short preface, Trevor recalls shoplifting batteries as a ten-year-old, and his mother telling the security guard to take him to jail so he can "learn the consequences." The guard lets Trevor go, assuming he must be "some wayward orphan, because what mother would send her ten-year-old child to jail?"

Despite how extraordinarily draconian South Africa's apartheid police state can be, Patricia is in some ways even more draconian and demanding of Trevor.

Trevor's mother is ruthless—like many black parents, she tries "to discipline [him] before the system does." Getting arrested is commonplace in Alex, and Patricia hates that Trevor hangs out there, especially because "it didn't pressure [him] to become better." In university, she argues, the other students would motivate him. She insists that if Trevor gets arrested, she will not help him. It is "the ultimate tough love," even if "it doesn't always work."

Patricia fundamentally believes that Trevor will become what others expect of him: by expecting so much of him as a child, she did her best to make sure he fears authority because South Africa's authorities do whatever they wish with black men; she also clearly sees how Alexandra is giving Trevor permission to fail because nobody expects anything of anyone else there.

One day, Trevor sees an ad for a cell phone clearance sale in the suburbs and knows he and Sizwe can make a profit. So he steals one of Abel's junk cars, as he has been doing for years, and summarily gets pulled over. Cops never give a reason for pulling people over; they just do because they can. He is more afraid of his mother than the law, but the officer realizes that the car is not Trevor's and does not match the old license plate he has slapped on it. In fact, it has no clear owner at all. He gets arrested and charged with stealing a car—carjacking happens all the time in South Africa, often along with murder. Afraid of his mother's tough love and Abel's violent fury, Trevor decides not to contact them.

Again, the police act first and ask questions later; Trevor is not only stopped merely because the cop assumes he is guilty of something, *but also assumed guilty of the worst possible crime that could lead his license plate not to match. But Trevor does not make a distinction in kind between his fear of the legal consequences and his fear of his mother, even though her consistent and principled "tough love" is designed precisely to save him from the arbitrary and sadistic violence that the legal system can use against him.*


The cop explains to Trevor that he needs to meet a lawyer, because otherwise he could end up awaiting trial in prison for months. He offers a defense attorney's business card and Trevor calls him, then calls a friend whose father is willing to loan him money for the legal fees. Trevor gets thrown in a holding cell for the night and realizes, "*Oh, shit. This is real.*" The next day, he tries to look tough—fortunately, the colored gangs are South Africa's most violent, and he "played the stereotype," speaking in accented Afrikaans and managing to get the rest of his cellmates to leave him alone. He soon realizes that they are all probably faking their toughness, too. The food isn't horrible, and Trevor starts to think jail is pretty tolerable, with the free food and a total lack of obligations.

Even though he has been unfairly targeted by the police, Trevor also has distinctive advantages in jail—his capacity to pay for a lawyer and pretend to be tough—which show how much more unfair it could be for someone who is at the very bottom of the economic, racial, and ethnic totem poles. His strange realization that jail offers material comforts with no work obligations reveals the perverse fact that jails and prisons are effectively the only institutions where the government provides anything to South African minorities: the degree of poverty people face in townships is so severe that the prospect of going to jail may actually not be much of a deterrent.

On Trevor's third day in jail, "the largest man [he]'d ever seen" gets thrown into his cell and "everyone was terrified." But the man is speaking Tsonga—the same language Abel speaks—and the guard is speaking Zulu, so Trevor steps in to translate and immediately wins the giant man's favor. This guy turns out to be "the biggest teddy bear in the world," a shoplifter hoping to sell some stolen videogames to support his family, not the murderer he appeared to be. They become friends and Trevor increasingly realizes how irrational the law can be—this man spoke no English, had no money or educated relatives to help him, and would probably end up in prison, even though Trevor's offense was worse.

Trevor again uses language to avoid a potential conflict and bridge people from different South African communities; he soon realizes that the Tsonga man's appearance of toughness and danger is more a product of his own assumptions about criminality, which shows that prejudice is not just limited to whites or agents of the law, but rather deeply ingrained in even people who become victims of it. This systematic prejudice is also bound to deny this man the opportunities Trevor gets because he speaks English and can afford an attorney. Just like Trevor realized in Alexandra, crime was an act of desperate necessity for this man rather than a sign of moral evil, and without an understanding of this contributing context the legal system is bound to perpetuate rather than fight crime.


When it is time for Trevor's bail hearing, he gets briefly thrown in a holding cell under the jailhouse with a wide variety of people; for the first time, he realizes "the difference between criminals and people who've committed crimes." As soon as he walks in, a man shouts, "It's gonna be a good night tonight!" in Zulu. Another cries to Trevor about how he has been beaten and raped in jail. The cell is divided by race, and again Trevor does not know where to go—he cannot afford to have the colored gangsters find out he is just pretending, but would he infuriate them by going to hang out in the black corner? It feels like "the high school cafeteria from hell." Trevor decides to hang out with the white guys, who look harmless.

"The difference between criminals and people who've committed crimes" is socialization: the first man, used to being treated as an offender and neglected by the state, becomes the stereotypical image of a hardened criminal; the second, likely imprisoned for the first time, shows the scarring effects of inhuman prisons. The cell's racial division recalls Trevor's first day of sixth grade, when he has to choose a side and ends up hanging out with the black kids—but here, it is unclear whether Trevor choosing the white guys means he has sold out due to fear and aligned with the oppressor or simply used his ability to navigate diverse cultural contexts in order to save himself from turning out like the man who cries to him.

Trevor gets called up for his hearing after only an hour, and his lawyer and Mlungisi are waiting. The judge asks "How are you?" and Trevor breaks down. The judge gets angry, having asked "who are you?" not "how are you?" Everyone laughs, and the hearing goes quickly: Trevor gets a trial date and goes home on bail. He is elated to be free; his week in jail was "like an eternity."

Even when the legal system has pushed Trevor to his breaking point, he still receives no sympathy; nevertheless, because he has an attorney and can communicate with the judge in English, he manages to go free until his trial, a fate clearly not reserved for many of the other people he's encountered.

Trevor spends a night at Mlungisi's place and then returns home, where his mother is silent. He tells her all sorts of stories about spending a week hanging out with Mlungisi, and Patricia is visibly disappointed—she reveals that she paid the bail and lawyer. She obviously knows—the car has been missing for a week, and Trevor's friend's father immediately called Patricia when Trevor asked for the money. Patricia reminds Trevor that she is so hard on him because she loves him: "when I beat you, I'm trying to save you. When they beat you, they're trying to kill you."

More disappointed that Trevor was afraid to admit what happened than that he spent the week in jail, Patricia clearly distinguishes her "tough love" from the government's gratuitous violence and shows why Trevor was wrong to fear her more than jail. This contrast between discipline and rage also plays a central role in the coming final chapter.

CHAPTER 18

In Noah's final preface, he remembers one Saturday, when he secretly eats a huge bowl of custard and jelly that is intended for a weeklong celebration for the whole family. That night, mosquitoes devour him, and he wakes up bloated from the dessert and itchy from the jelly. His mother tells him it's time to go to church, and that Jesus would make him feel better. Trevor argues that "Jesus gives us medicine," so taking medicine and staying home would be the best way to honor him.

As always, Patricia lets nothing stand between her family and church(es) on Sunday; and, as always, Trevor thinks of an excuse to get out of it (even though, this time, he certainly has sins to repent for). This final preface recalls the events of the first chapter, but also foreshadows the end of this chapter, when medicine and Jesus become decisive factors in Patricia's life.

The chapter begins. After getting his makeover for the dance with Babiki, Trevor finally starts getting interest from girls, and he returns to the hair salon every week to make sure his cornrows stay in perfect condition. On Sundays, his mom gets dressed up for church and teases him for his own vanity. She is beautiful and confident, Trevor admits.

Trevor sees a parallel between himself, who dresses up for girls, and his mother, who dresses up for Jesus; this recalls his argument that God replaced husbands in Soweto, sustaining women spiritually when men are unavailable due to work or prison.

Patricia probably "broke more than a few hearts in her day," but Trevor only ever knew of her being with his father and Abel. They meet Abel when bringing their **Volkswagen** to the repair shop. "Handsome, but [not] good-looking," Abel is strong and charming, with a good sense of humor and an eagerness to help those in need. This "made his abuse even harder to deal with." He is never a father figure for Trevor, just "*mom's cool friend*."

Trevor and Patricia are both radically independent; neither feels the need for an adult man to round out their family dynamic, and Patricia starts dating him simply because she likes him, not because she needs him. Of course, this contrasts with Abel's own motivations for dating her—just like with people in the community, he needs to be needed and depended upon, which Patricia does not give him.

When Trevor's mother announces that she is planning to marry Abel, Trevor immediately says it is a bad idea because "there's just something not right about him." His name reflects his dual personality: his English name is "the good son" from the Bible, but his Tsonga name, Ngisaveni, means "be afraid." They get married anyway, and soon Patricia has another son, Andrew, when Trevor is nine years old. They visit Abel's family in the tropical Tsonga homeland, and Trevor finds out that "Tsonga culture [...] is extremely patriarchal." Men do little besides work and drink; women do all the domestic tasks and literally bow when they meet men. Patricia mocks these customs by going over the top, which makes everyone uncomfortable. She later refuses to return.

Trevor's gut feeling here foreshadows the gradual dissolution of Abel's relationship with Patricia and the family, recalling his earlier statement that South Africans' English manes are chosen for convenience, whereas their native names are self-fulfilling prophecies that represent their personality. He soon sees that Abel's traditional Tsonga conceptions of gender are fundamentally incompatible with Patricia's independence, and she is not afraid to point out how ridiculous she finds it that his family effectively treats women as servants.

After Andrew's birth, Abel increasingly tries to "impose his ideas of what he thought his family should be," although he seldom gets in Trevor's way. He forces the dogs to start living in the yard and refuses to fix Patricia's **car**, so that he becomes the family's only means of transportation and so that Patricia cannot spend all Sunday at church (but she goes by minibus, anyway). Trevor can no longer see his father, either.

Abel begins acting out the standard gender roles of Tsonga culture, based on a fundamental belief that he owns *his family and thus gets to decide what he wants to do with them. He isolates Patricia in order to consolidate her control over her, but since Trevor is not his biological son, he feels little connection to him.*

Patricia makes Abel stop smoking weed when they get married, and he starts drinking instead, usually starting at work. When he does, his eyes get bloodshot, and he explodes randomly into violence. Once, he drives home drunk and falls asleep on the couch while making food—the house fills with smoke and nearly burns down, but Abel is "too drunk to care." Patricia calls her mother Frances, insisting that "this man, he's going to kill us one day," but Abel hangs up her call. They get into an argument, and Abel attacks her, hitting her and knocking her down "for a good thirty seconds." When she gets back up, Patricia keeps yelling at him, and he hits her again. She brings Trevor and Andrew to the police station.

Abel's desire for control over the family contrasts with his complete lack of control over himself (or anything at all) when he is drunk, which becomes most of the time; he seems to have no empathy whatsoever for the family and uses escalating violence to control Patricia's actions. As always, she refuses to live by other people's rules, and so she has no interest in giving him a second chance or the control that he craves. In fact, she stands her ground on principle, and he attacks her because he is incapable of resolving conflicts, asserting his masculinity, or defining his relationship with her through words or principles. Unable to justify why she owes him complete control over her life, Abel resorts to brute force, which can be seen as a sort of moral cowardice.

However, the police tell Patricia to calm down and think over it before flat-out refusing to charge Abel, who soon shows up. The cops reassure him that everything will be fine, that they understand that "it happens," and not to worry. Patricia takes Andrew and Trevor to Soweto, and a few weeks later, Abel comes to apologize. Frances encourages Patricia to give him another chance, and she agrees. For years, everything is fine at home.

Clearly, the South African police have little interest in protecting everyone equally. Even though they have harassed Trevor, demanding bribes and arresting him without solid evidence, when there is obvious proof of Abel's assault they do nothing, even taking his side and treating him as the victim of a wife audacious enough to report abuse.

Abel is an excellent mechanic, and Patricia sincerely wants him to succeed. They buy the company Abel works for, realize it is in horrible debt, and eventually sell their house and start living out of the garage where the business is based. Trevor sleeps in cars—the most comfortable are German and American ones. At age 11, Trevor starts working there, too. The business and family keep losing money, though, and eventually they are reduced to eating worms. This is the unhappiest period of Trevor's life, although he does not resent Abel or his mother for getting him into it.

One of the most tragic elements of Patricia's relationship with Abel is that she sincerely invests in him, tries to save his business for him, and is perfectly capable of doing so, while he views her as a piece of property to be owned and controlled. Her trust in Abel even draws the family back into poverty, as they lose their Eden Park home to the "black tax." Patricia and Abel's realization about his company's debts is also a version of this tax, since it shows how black business owners' inability to learn the rules of the white capitalist economy during apartheid stifles them. On top of this, they start out centuries behind when they are finally allowed to participate in this economy at the end of apartheid, as Trevor discussed in his chapter on the "Cheese Boys."

Trevor realizes the problem: Abel is buying auto parts on credit, with "a crazy markup," and drinking any profits he made instead of paying off his debts, which just get increasingly worse. Patricia quits her job to run the business, which starts going better, but Abel begins resenting her for it and keeps drinking away the profits. Eventually, Patricia gives up and gets another secretary job, which gets them the house in Highlands North, just as Abel's creditors take away his workshop.

Abel is more incensed to lose control of his business than he is to lose his profits; in a sense, he is so stuck on short-term projects and the appearance of control that he cannot act strategically in the long term. This also more fundamentally reflects the lack of knowledge and resources that Trevor sees as one of the main factors locking black South Africans into a cycle of poverty.

Unlike with Trevor, Patricia stops physically disciplining Andrew relatively early on. She learns this lesson from Trevor, who is never violent, even though his world is defined by violence; he recognizes that violence is pointless and love truly makes relationships function by letting people "create a new world" for one another.

Although Patricia's corporal punishment taught Trevor valuable lessons, he seems to teach her that those lessons are transmissible without violence (and she likely worries about replicating the effects of Abel's abuse). Trevor's argument about the transformative potential of love is the central strand in his portrait of his relationship with his mother; she allowed him to succeed by opening worlds that he was not supposed to access, and of course her kind of mutual world-making love stands in opposition to Abel's controlling, world-restricting, violent conception of love.

Just as Patricia stops physically disciplining the children, Abel starts hitting them instead. This first happens to Trevor in the sixth grade. He gets caught forging his mother's signature on a form for school—at home, she does not care, but Abel takes him into a closet and starts hitting him repeatedly. Trevor is terrified, more than any other time in his life—it feels like rage, not discipline. Trevor manages to escape, then runs out of the house—but Abel chases him, and he continues running until he is "three neighborhoods away." From then on, Trevor avoids Abel as much as possible at home, but Abel still manages to hit him on occasion. On the other hand, Abel loves and respects Andrew, his firstborn and the only person in the house who is not afraid of his father.

Abel's attacks give Trevor a small taste of the daily terror his mother must endure—but courageously confronts for years, since she is not lucky enough to simply isolate herself from him. Further demonstrating how Abel views family as property, he sees children as nothing more than extensions of their fathers: he treats Andrew well because Andrew is his own son and effectively does not consider Trevor part of the family because Trevor is Robert's. Patricia's parental role plays no part in this equation of male "ownership."

After the business fails, Patricia legally divorces Abel in order to save her credit, but they stay together. Abel continues fixing cars, now in the yard, and drinking away all his profits; Patricia gets a better position at her real estate company and ends up paying for everything. Her independence makes Abel furious, and he hits her again. The adult Trevor interjects that he "can't recall the details" because there were so many more incidents just like this one, but he does remember that the police again blew it off. Every time this happens, Patricia tells Trevor to pray.

At a certain point, Patricia realizes that Abel poses a threat to her financial future even if she leaves, not to mention the threat he poses to her physical safety; she takes on the traditional male role instead of the female one, and Abel blames her even though she is merely filling in to cover for his own failures. So she is in a double bind: either she lets her family starve (because Abel cannot pay the bills) or she gets blamed for keeping the family afloat. Her resort to prayer suggests that she feels there is nothing more she can do to resolve the situation.

Abel is unrecognizable when drunk, nothing like his usual self—he once pees on Trevor's floor, thinking he is in the bathroom, and often kicks Trevor out of bed, thinking Trevor's bed is his own. He also beats his buddies who work at the shop (and drink after work) with him, and he kicks Fufi all the time, which are both warning signs for the family, indications that his anger is flaring up. Trevor later learns that, besides being deaf, Fufi had "some condition" that prevented her from feeling pain—she always gives Abel second chances, but so does everyone else, because he is "likable and charming" and part of the family. The beatings are infrequent, every few years, but just often enough for everyone to remember that it might happen again.

Abel is spiraling out of control in even more domains of his life, as evidenced particularly by his abuse of his workers. While his violence is an attempt to regain control over others, it instead pushes others away, making it even harder for him to control them and frustrating him even further; violence is a self-perpetuating cycle, much like the historical cycles of violent ethnic and racial hierarchy in South Africa among the Dutch, British, coloreds, and various African indigenous groups that Trevor has summarized throughout the book. Whereas Abel cannot discern love from violence, Trevor has already shown that they are opposites, since violence perpetuates the condition of power asymmetry (even if it occasionally changes who is in power) while love allows parties to insist on equality and mutual interest, so thereby "create a new world."

One day after school, Trevor's mom tells him that Abel has bought a gun because "he thinks he's the policeman of the world." Trevor soon moves out, since he's grown as big as Abel, who increasingly hates him and sees him as a reminder of Patricia's old relationship with Robert. Soon, Patricia and Abel move to separate bedrooms, and Trevor is counting the years until Andrew turns 18—and then Patricia gets pregnant and gives birth to Isaac nine months later.

Abel's gun—which he is definitely willing to use—suggests that he is falling deeper into his cycle of violence, trying to control the entire world like a "policeman" to cope with his accelerating loss of control over himself. Still unable to see Trevor as anything more than a symbol of the fact that Patricia has not always been "his," Abel's masculinity becomes so fragile that he quite literally cannot stand to have Trevor around the house.

Trevor almost entirely stops visiting, but one day when he does, there are police cars out front. Abel has hit Patricia with a bicycle—but the cops are friends of his, and again they let him off. Trevor confronts him, and he apologizes but blames Patricia and insists that he has to show his workers that he can "control [his] wife." Patricia has a shack built in the backyard and moves into it, both for her protection and as a way of forcing Abel to answer to the world.

The police continue to take Abel's side, but Patricia insists on continuing to call them for the same reasons she builds the shack: because they may eventually help, and because it allows her to make a point that Abel's actions are wrong. Yet Abel still sees Patricia's independence as a sign of his own weakness, although it remains unclear why, given that independence, she is still with him after all this abuse.

Trevor is confused and frustrated that his mother doesn't "just leave," but he remarks that at this time he has not even had a girlfriend and has no idea how relationships work and how "sex and hatred and fear can intertwine." He insists that he cannot be part of "this dysfunctional thing" and cuts off contact with the family; he blames his mother for choosing to stay, just as she has taught him that people are always and solely responsible for their choices. But he does not understand the social context around domestic violence, either—it is normal in South Africa, and women risk ostracism if they leave men. During this last conversation, Patricia states matter-of-factly that "if I leave he'll kill us." Trevor never brings it up again.

In retrospect, Trevor realizes that he was naïve about both relationships and cultural expectations at the time due to his youth and inexperience; this is also, luckily, because his main loving relationship (that with his mother) has been so unconditionally enriching and positive. In hindsight, Trevor now sees why his mother made the decision she did: she was entirely serious about the threat Abel posed and focused more on her safety than her independence. And the fact that domestic violence remains a cultural norm shows how patriarchy remains pervasive after apartheid, intersecting with racial, ethnic, and cultural prejudice; there is an entire distinctive women's experience of colonialism and apartheid that Trevor can only catch glimpses of (for instance, through realizing this cultural norm, or through his moment of empathy with Babiki at prom).

Patricia eventually does leave, although Trevor is already deep into his career, living with Mlungisi, and out of touch with the family. She marries someone else and moves into another house in Highlands North; a few years later, Trevor gets a phone call from his mom's number on a Sunday morning. It is Andrew, reporting that "mom's been shot." Trevor immediately knows who did it and rushes to the hospital with Mlungisi. On the way, he calls Andrew again. Andrew explains what happened: when the family got home from church, Abel was waiting with his gun; he shot Patricia in the leg, and then in the head. Trevor breaks down in the car, crying like never before, in an absolute "expression of raw pain." When he arrives at the hospital, Andrew is covered in blood and breaks down, too.

Patricia's prediction—and Trevor's worst fear—tragically comes true. His "raw pain" encompasses various kinds of loss: the loss of his mother's freedom from Abel, regret at temporarily distancing himself from the family, and of course most of all the loss of his main "teammate," teacher, and inspiration in life. Trevor respects his mother more than anyone else in the world and thinks that she is the last person in the world who would deserve such a fate, not only because she was an incredible mother but also because of her devotion to God and because she has already overcome so much during and after apartheid, thanks solely to her own fearlessness.

Inside, Patricia is covered in blood on a gurney with a giant hole through her face. Miraculously, she is awake, and she tells Trevor, "it's okay, baby. I'm fine." She tells Trevor to go to Andrew, and he does.

Incredibly, even despite her injuries, Patricia continues to put Trevor's needs first and worries more about his sanity than her own grave condition.

Andrew tells Trevor the story in more detail: Abel drunkenly insisted that he would kill the whole family, which had "stolen [his] life" and "taken everything away from [him]." Andrew tried to calm him down, and his father threatened to shoot him first. Thinking back to these events, Trevor feels that Andrew must have dealt with a far deeper pain, since his father shot his mother, and he has to reconcile this with his love for them both. Isaac is crying and confused; Abel starts firing randomly, and Patricia jumps toward him in an effort to protect the rest of her family, who manage to run away. Abel tries to shoot her in the head, but his gun misfires. As she tries to drive away, however, he shoots her from behind the **car**. Andrew jumps in the car and drives to the hospital.

Patricia is also astonishingly selfless during Abel's attack, throwing herself in front of her family even though she certainly knows that she is the primary target anyway. He continues to believe that he had an inalienable right to own his family, which Patricia has "taken […] away" by simply pursuing her own freedom. (According to this twisted logic, if the family is "his," he also has the right to destroy it.) While Isaac is still very young, Andrew is indubitably in the hardest position, especially since he spent so many years trying to stop his father's violence and genuinely loving him despite it.

Andrew does not know what has happened to Abel. Trevor decides to call him, and he picks up. Trevor yells that he "*killed* my *mom*!" and Abel says, "if I could find you, I would kill you as well" before hanging up. Trevor is frightened and furious.

Unlike after his previous episodes of violent abuse, Abel shows no signs of remorse but also remains emotionally level; his attempt to kill Patricia is not a crime of passion but rather one of cold, calculated vengeance, because he believes he has been denied his due (an obedient family). Yet again, he conceives love as a legalistic duty rather than an interpersonal feeling, and so has no sense that his abuse would make it justifiable for Patricia to leave him (despite seemingly recognizing and apologizing for his mistakes every time).

A nurse comes out and reveals that Trevor's mother does not have health insurance, which means they have to send her back out to a state hospital. Trevor insists that he will pay and the nurse tells him it could cost him hundreds of thousands, or millions, and leave him in debt for the rest of his life. Trevor pauses in shock, wondering what his mother would do, and what would happen if he pays the money and she dies anyway. He will have to take care of his family and could "get trapped by the cycle of poverty and violence" that he was supposed to break the family out of. But he insists and gives the nurse the card.

Like in the United States and much of the developing world, good medical care is a privilege reserved for the rich in South Africa; paying his mother's bills is a version of the "black tax" that could threaten to leave him with neither money nor Patricia. But the fact that he considers what she would do shows how successfully she has imprinted her moral values in him; he only ever considers not paying because he knows how much his freedom matters to her.

A few hours, the doctor comes out and says that, even though he hates the word "miracle," it is the only way to describe what happened to Patricia. The bullet that went through her head managed to miss her brain, eye socket, and "every major vein, artery, and nerve." She is stable and going to be fine, and the doctor tells the family to go home for some rest. She will ultimately only have to spend four days in the hospital.

Astonishingly, Patricia emerges from the shooting almost unscathed; the bullet's path is so improbable that even the doctor cannot think of a rational explanation. Trevor's decision to pay her fees and Patricia's life's worth of prayers clearly seem to have been rewarded.

The next morning, Trevor visits Patricia, who seems "frail and weak." He wonders why he did not kill Abel himself years before and feels "angry at God" for letting this happen to Patricia despite her devotion to religion. Patricia wakes up, and Trevor starts crying. She tells him not to, and that he should "look on the bright side." There is no bright side, he insists. But "of course there is," she replies, for "now you're officially the best-looking person in the family." They both break out into laughter, "the way [they] always did" as a team.

Patricia's response to nearly dying is almost inhumanly optimistic and shows that her resilience is boundless: through humor, she takes one of the worst imaginable human experiences in stride, and the last chapter ends just like the first one, with her and Trevor laughing their way out of a situation that would terrorize almost anyone else.

In a brief afterword, Noah explains that the family later manages to "piece the whole story together." After shooting Patricia, Abel takes his frightened four-year-old son Isaac to a family friend's house. On the way, he explains that he is planning to kill himself. Abel spends the rest of the day visiting relatives, explaining what he has done and what he is planning to do. But one cousin tells him to "man up" and turn himself in, and he agrees.

Even more frightening than Abel's cold-blooded murder attempt is the fact that he did not seem to be in another one of his out-of-control drunken rages; rather, he had a concrete plan, acted in accord with the most extreme imaginable version of possessive love, and left the situation with a level head and his son. It is difficult to underestimate how traumatizing this must be for Isaac, who understands what he has just seen and yet seems too young to fully process its implications and emotional consequences for his relationships with his parents.

Astonishingly, Abel manages to get bail and is free again in a month. Because none of the previous calls resulted in charges, he has a clean criminal record. He gets a lawyer and insists that his children need him, then pleads guilty to attempted murder and gets three years of *probation*—no prison time. He still has partial custody of Andrew and Isaac and is "walking around Johannesburg today, completely free," still living in the same neighborhood near Patricia.

Abel's fate shows how deeply flawed South Africa's justice system continues to be after apartheid. It sharply contrasts with those of the people Trevor met in jail, who were invariably charged with much more minor crimes; the Tsonga man who shoplifted video games to feed his family probably received a harsher sentence than Abel, who shot his ex-wife in the head out of spite. Unfortunately, this is unsurprising given how lightly the police took all of Patricia's earlier domestic violence calls; clearly, those in the legal system are more interested in personal gain and social control than justice.

And then there is Patricia's side of the story. When she is on the ground and Abel is pointing the gun at her, she prays—and, inexplicably, the gun misfires four times. The police later find the four misfired bullets, but cannot explain how Abel's gun could have done what it did.

Patricia appears to have achieved another miracle through prayer: not only did she take a bullet to the head and survive nearly unscathed, but Abel's gun misfires precisely when he is preparing to murder her. With the experts unable to explain either of these, her devotion finally appears to have been repaid.

The hospital bill is 50,000 rand, but Trevor still tells his mother he "can't believe you didn't have health insurance." She insists that she has God, and he admits that "for once I cannot argue with you." But Jesus did not pay the hospital bill, Trevor jokes. Patricia replies, "but He blessed me with the son who did."

The hospital bill seems like a third miracle: while the cost of Patricia's treatment initially threatened to bankrupt the family, undo all of Trevor's economic progress, and send them back into poverty, ultimately it is far less than the nurse warned. The book closes with a characteristic exchange between Trevor and Patricia—through religion and humor, she always manages to see the bright side.


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