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INSIDE
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Teaching notes prepared
by Sonia Murr

VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Edited by Faye Crossman

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Born a Crime by Trevor Noah

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Introduction

Trevor Noah will be familiar to many as a stand-up comedian and host of *The Daily Show,* an American satirical news program on Comedy Central. Noah also hosted the 2021 and 2022 Grammy Awards. Some of his long form stand-up performances, *Son of Patricia* (2018) and *Afraid of the Dark* (2017), can be viewed on Netflix. Many of his other acclaimed stand-up shows, *Lost in Translation* (2016) and *African American* (2013), have been documented and celebrated across YouTube, with compilations of some of his best sketches attracting millions of views. At the time of writing this guide, Noah was touring his show *Back to Abnormal* (2022) internationally, with a feature film version of *Born a Crime* in development.

Born in 1984 to a Xhosa mother and a Swiss-German father in Johannesburg, Noah spent the first ten years of his life under apartheid in South Africa, knowing that his very existence was technically illegal. When apartheid ended in 1994, the injustices enacted by apartheid's white supremacist regime continued to affect the people of South Africa. This world of injustice provides the backdrop for his memoir. Described by *The New York Times* as a 'love letter to his remarkable mother' in 2016, *Born a Crime* is a deeply personal exploration of his childhood filled with snapshots of his life under-, and post-apartheid South Africa. While it is full of his trademark sense of humour, Noah shifts very easily between comedic memoir and erudite observations about the painful aspects of the very things that provide him with the many laughs he ordinarily elicits from a stand-up audience. He weaves the political and cultural history of South Africa seamlessly into his own personal recollections, and what emerges is a story of a life that is powerfully shaped by apartheid, but one that nonetheless thrives despite the scars caused by the brutality and horrors of that system. The burdens of history weigh heavily on Noah and his family; however, Noah makes it clear that any success he has experienced is due in large part to the resilience and fortitude of his fiercely religious mother. The memoir emerges as a story of all the ways Noah was able to claw out a rich and loving existence, despite the suffering he experienced in his early years. At times, Noah's sense of humour seems so free of bitterness around his circumstances that it is hard to believe that some of the more harrowing stories could possibly be true. The way he achieves this is through a finely tuned ability to tell stories that are simultaneously hilarious and horrific. His story about 'taking a shit' (p. 43) is a case in point. This vignette, about five-year-old Trevor doing what he can to avoid walking outside in the rain to a filthy outhouse, leads the reader through a hilarious recount that reveals itself to be a story about poverty, humility and what it means to be free. The lesson for those of us who have never known anything but the privilege of a plumbed, indoor toilet is delivered via the hilarity of 'having a moment of pure self-awareness' (p. 43). Noah doesn't centre the story around complaints about a makeshift toilet, as much as he shapes it into a story about privilege and shared humanity. That the lesson in privilege comes with the line 'you are never more yourself than when you are taking a shit' (p. 43) does not diminish its power. Readers are invited to sit with the basic needs that they may have taken for granted in order to understand that poverty has a way of stripping away the things that offer people a sense of their own humanity.

Noah's mother is an unlikely heroine in many ways. In the early stages of the memoir, we are introduced to her zealousness when it comes to practising her religion. Without any knowledge or understanding of her own childhood story, we are given snapshots of her early in the novel, in which Noah characterises her as having a relentless commitment to God that was infuriating to him as a child. Once again, however, he delivers this characterisation in a way that is layered with laughter. After one of the more brutal memories that he shares about escaping death at the hands of Zulu minibus drivers (p. 17), Noah describes them both collapsing into laughter: 'this little boy and his mom, our arms and legs covered in blood and dirt, laughing together through the pain in the light of a petrol station on the side of the road in the middle of the night.' (p. 17). It is this blend of horror and laughter that brings together form and message, voice and vision, so beautifully.

Noah's memoir is not simply a story about the horrors of apartheid, or about the brutality of structural racism. It is a story about resilience, resistance, family, patriarchy, justice, faith, sacrifice, humour, coming-of-age, education, language and luck *despite* these things.

Having said that, some understanding of apartheid is central to really comprehending the weight and intentions behind Noah's storytelling. The prefaces to each chapter provide some of this knowledge, but it would benefit students to refer to the **Historical timeline** and **Glossary** in the **Appendix** at the end of this guide. In addition, engaging in some wider reading, research and viewing, perhaps in the form of group presentations early on, will equip students with adequate context for their study of the text. It's also important to note that there are some quite horrific and violent moments in the text that need adequate preparation, and students may benefit from content notes in advance of the closer studies of more confronting passages in class. The following advice is from the 2023 VCAA text list synopses:

> Teachers should be aware that there are some confronting scenes depicting racial and domestic violence. However, the scenes contextualise Noah's life experiences as a mixed-race child living in South Africa and are ultimately tempered by Noah's humour, strength and resilience as he comes to understand his life.

Suggested classroom activities

Context activity 1: Education

Watch the short *Time Magazine* video (Baker, 2016) about the 1976 Soweto uprising, inspired by student protestors and the photographer, Sam Nzima, who documented it. Read the accompanying article. The uprising was just eight years before Trevor Noah was born. In 1974, the government made teaching in Afrikaans compulsory. The Soweto uprising was a response to this policy and has been described as a moment in South African history that changed the socio-political history in South Africa.

The video and article (see excerpt below) paint a detailed picture of what it might have been like to grow up in Soweto under apartheid. Consider the implications of Noah crediting access to education, and knowledge of multiple languages, as two pieces of a survival puzzle for his mother and himself.

> Not only was Afrikaans the language of their colonial oppressors—Afrikaans evolved from the Dutch spoken by South Africa's first European settlers—she was already having a hard time understanding much of her subject matter. 'Obviously physical science on its own is very difficult,' remembers Sithole, now 65. 'The very same subject that you are struggling with in English, we are going to do them in Afrikaans? This doesn't make sense.'
>
> So Sithole and an estimated 20,000 other students from Soweto's high schools decided, in secret, to hold a protest. For a young woman caught up in the heady excitement of drafting slogans, writing signboards and practising revolutionary songs, it was an immense rush. 'We were a little bit scared, you know, but we felt free already. It was like, "Now we are taking the streets of Soweto with a message."' The night before the protest, Sithole ironed her school uniform and packed her school bag with placards, while her younger brother, 13-year-old Hector Pieterson, looked on enviously. Younger students were not supposed to be part of the protest. (Baker, 2016)

Once students have read the article and watched the video, ask them to spend five minutes researching The South African Bantu Education Act of 1953. What is it? This resource will be useful: https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising

- How does Trevor Noah's schooling at Maryvale, H.A. Jack, and Sandringham, differ from what he would have received at a Bantu school?
- According to 'The Second Girl', how does Patricia avoid a Bantu education and learn to speak English?
- How might both of their lives have been very different if they had not experienced the kind of education they received?
- What did Noah's mother do to enable his access to quality education? What kinds of actions did she take and decisions did she make?

Context activity 2: South Africa finds inspiration in White Australia

It is not easy to recognise elements of apartheid in Australia. Often it takes outsiders to make the comparison. One such outsider is South African writer Sisonke Msimang who moved to Australia after spending years writing about and commenting on human rights, race relations and government accountability in South Africa.

Since arriving she has recognised a systematic approach to 'assimilate' and 'eradicate' Australia's Aboriginal heritage. She says the Australian government employs tactics of 'trickery, disposition and violence' that are 'as ugly as you'll find anywhere in the world', practices which she found all too similar to those implemented during South Africa's apartheid (Korff, 2020).

Ask students to research Australia's own racist government policies and compare these to South Africa's systems of oppression under apartheid.

Ask students to do some inquiry into specific policies: either individually, in pairs, or in small groups. This can be run as a group jigsaw activity where each student takes the role of expert on a different policy and reports back to small groups, before running class discussion on what they have discovered in their research. Students should look at the different mechanisms of apartheid outlined in the **Glossary** at the end of this guide and compare Australian policy history with the goals of an apartheid administration in South Africa.

Some policies for student research and discussion:

- 1897 – Queensland Aboriginal Act
- 1901 – White Australia Policy
- 1936 – Native Administration Act
- 2007 – Northern Territory Emergency Response. Students should look into the laws that were introduced as a result of what would become known as the 2007 NT Intervention. Ask them to look into John Pilger's investigative journalism and his comparisons between South African Apartheid and the fallout from the NT Intervention (Pilger, 2013).

Context Activity 3: Born to write

Using the list in the 2016 *New York Times* article 'My 10 Favorite Books: Trevor Noah', research some of Trevor Noah's favourite writers and then present findings, in a mini-tutorial style, to the class. First, ask students what they imagine these stories might be about, purely based on their titles, and then ask students do some research and find parallels between the synopses of these stories, and what they know about *Born a Crime.*

- Rian Malan, *My Traitor's Heart*
- Khaya Dlanga, *To Quote Myself: A Memoir*
- Sol Ploatje, *Native Life in South Africa*
- Fatima Meer, *Higher Than Hope*
- Sandra Laing, *When She Was White*

Ways into the text

The audio book

The audio book is an excellent way for students to familiarise themselves with the text. More of a performance than a reading, the audio book brings Noah's comedic talent and animated delivery to the memoir in a way that has great potential to engage non-readers; especially those who are familiar with his stand-up comedy, or his work on *The Daily Show.* There are many parts of the text read in languages other than English and to hear these sections read with the appropriate intonation and accent is very helpful. Likewise, the pronunciation of names and places is made easier with the availability of the audio book. The characterisation he brings to members of his family and some of his friends through his voice is rich and entertaining. Listen to sections in class together, or recommend students purchase their own copies, if possible.

Suggested classroom activities

1. Give students a list of un-numbered, jumbled preface first lines (use list below) and a list of numbered chapter titles. Ask students to first attach some possible themes, issues and ideas that the preface might be steering the reader towards, before asking them to match the preface with the chapter. They can do this in teams or individually but they need to have a justification for each match. Then pair up individuals or organise groups and have them discuss and debate each of their matches, before engaging in class discussion. Finally, look at the text for the correct matches. Teachers could also set this up as a kind of 'go fish' activity. Note that there are some matches that seem incongruous: the preface to Chapter 18 is a case in point. Discuss why this might be. Why would Noah have something so innocent (custard and jelly) as the foundation for the preface to the chapter about domestic abuse and attempted murder? Is it his way of showing that his innocence was somehow still intact despite his violent childhood; that his mother protected him so fiercely that this is one of the things that he remembers as significant in his life?

- 'The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other.'
- 'Apartheid was perfect racism.'
- 'South Africa is a mix of the old and the new, the ancient and the modern, and South African Christianity is a perfect example of this.'
- 'When I was growing up we used to get American TV shows rebroadcast on our stations: *Doogie Howser, MD; Murder, She Wrote; Rescue 911* with William Shatner.'
- 'Before apartheid, any black South African who received a formal education was likely taught by European missionaries, foreign enthusiasts eager to Christianise and Westernise the natives.'
- 'Apartheid, for all its power, had fatal flaws baked in, starting with the fact that it never made any sense.'
- 'I grew up in a black family in a black neighbourhood in a black country.'
- 'When I was twenty-four years old, one day out of the blue my mother said to me, "you need to find your father".'
- 'When Dutch colonists landed at the southern tip of Africa over three hundred years ago, they encountered an indigenous people known as the Khoisan.'
- 'When I was growing up, my mum spent a lot of time trying to teach me about women.'
- 'Petrol for the car, like food, was an expense we could not avoid, but my mum could get more mileage out of a tank of petrol than any human who has ever been on a road in the history of automobiles.'
- 'I don't regret anything I've ever done in my life, any choice that I've ever made.'
- 'In every nice neighbourhood there is always one white family that Does Not Give a Fuck.'
- 'South Africa has eleven official languages.'
- 'In Germany, no child finishes high school without learning about the Holocaust.'
- 'Alexandra was a farm originally named for the wife of the white man who owned it.'
- 'Once when I was ten years old, visiting my dad in Yeoville, I needed batteries for one of my toys.'
- 'My favourite thing to eat as a kid, and still my favourite dessert of all time, was custard and jelly, what Americans would call Jell-O.'

2. Timestamping the text – invite students to look at each chapter and deduce where the events sit on the timeline of Noah's life. This will help them understand that the text is not entirely chronological or linear. As they figure out which events take place when, get them to zoom in on some of the many intertextual and pop cultural references made in the memoir, for example, Busta Rhymes and Spliff Star, Montell Jordan, the arrival of McDonald's in South Africa, the TV show *Doogie Howser, MD* (there are many, many more). Students could develop a soundtrack for each chapter, using a song from particular points in history as a timestamp for parts of Noah's childhood. Start different lessons with different songs mentioned in the text and use these as hooks for discussion.
3. Watch the part of his stand-up show *Patricia* (YouTube) titled 'My mum got shot in the head' (eleven minutes). Compare the stand-up version of the story with the final chapter in his memoir, 'My Mother's Life'. How do the approaches to sharing the same story differ? How are they similar? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yphxh5L8YbQ
4. Given that the study of the chapter 'Go Hitler!' may pose some challenges in a classroom and school setting, considerable contextual unpacking is recommended. Students could listen to the Mediaite podcast below, and also read the reflection/watch the Rosh Hashannah service delivered at Temple Shalom, by a Rabbi Rachel Ackerman, in California in 2018, to gain a further perspective on this particular chapter:
    - Mediaite podcast interview: https://content.jwplatform.com/previews/rpCRcYaI
    - Reflection service by Rabbi Rachael Ackerman:
      - video link:
      https://venue.streamspot.com/video/6c348ef377
      - written transcript:
      https://www.templeshalom.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Rosh-HaShanah-Morning-5779-Learn-Listen-and-THEN-Speak.pdf
5. Watch the video below and consider the views and values that Noah shares here about violence against women. Ask students how they think the events in *Born a Crime* inform the ideas outlined in this video from his television program *The Daily Show*. Ask students to identify moments in the text where you see evidence of how he views the role of men in violence against women: 'Trevor Noah discusses the male role in violence against women': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDvrSWNMxNg
6. Get students to look closely at a map of South Africa or print out a wall-sized map to feature as a dynamic display point for your study of the text. As a class, students could map out all of the settings referenced in the memoir, adding quotes about places and notes about the plot points that occur there. Students could also use Google Earth and do a virtual geographical exploration of South Africa, visiting Noah's schools, the townships and various suburbs featured in the text (most of which are listed below). Students should endeavor to annotate the resource, situating each chapter in its appropriate setting. A permanent visual reference in the classroom might be helpful in this way but a collaborative Padlet resource using the map function would also work really well as a digital option. There are also various language maps that can be found online so students can get a sense of the different tribes and the prominence of various tribal languages in South Africa. Ask students to research the languages listed below and situate them in their relevant homelands.

Places

- Johannesburg
- Alexandra (Alex)
- Yeoville
- Soweto
- Eden Park
- Hillbrow
- Balfour Park Mall
- Cape Town
- Hammanskraal
- Highlands North
- Linksfield
- Swaziland
- Transkei
- H.A. Jack (School)
- Maryvale (School)
- Sandringham (School)

Languages

- Pedi
- Tsonga
- Xhosa
- Zulu
- Tswana
- Sotho

7. *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* is written as a memoir. The text combines verifiable facts of history from the beginnings of colonisation up until the text was published in 2016. The main focus, however, is the period between Trevor Noah's mother's childhood and the early 2000s. The text shifts between historical details of apartheid's oppressive systems, settings and figures of history, along with detailed descriptions of cultural and political tensions between different racial and tribal groups, and the personal impacts of all of these aspects of South Africa's white supremacist government upon Noah's childhood. Consider the following definition of memoir (added emphasis in bold):

   > Patti Miller, an expert on writing 'true life', says authors should ask why their memoir should be written. Miller believes there are good reasons to write a memoir – maybe the author **has a particular wisdom to impart or wants to assert a sense of identity.** The memoir **might be a healing document**, or it **could be filling a gap in social and cultural history**. It **might be even be written as revenge** (although Miller cautions against this). But **ultimately, the memoir holds the possibility of enlightening the reader**. (Jennings, 2022)

   Students could discuss whether Noah's memoir serves any of the functions above. If so, how?

Structure of the text

A memoir in three parts

Each ‘part’ of the text is loosely based around three different periods in Noah’s childhood: the first part focuses on his early childhood through primary school; the second, his teenage years from middle school through to his final year; and the third, his burgeoning independence as a young adult. Despite the overall shape of the memoir, it is not strictly chronological, with Noah moving between anecdotes and vignettes from different points of those periods of his life (and occasionally beyond). The stories are grouped more thematically: he weaves anecdotes together with concurrent ideas and issues.

The use of preface

Each of this memoir’s eighteen chapters is preceded by a short, bolded preface, offering a political, cultural and/or historical context for the personal vignettes within each chapter. These also, occasionally, offer what seem to be unrelated personal anecdotes, adding richness and texture to the story that follows. They capture the broader dynamics at play at the time, articulating the views and values of the decision-makers in his life, both familial and political.

The epigraph

Just as each preface to each chapter contextualises the broader world of the events in Noah’s life, the epigraph sets up the historical context. In addition, it sets up reader-awareness of the non-fiction style, through an excerpt from the 1927 Immorality Act, defining the ‘crime’ to which Noah is ‘born’ and the unbelievable, yet true story of his life. By setting up the memoir in this way, Noah signals that no matter how hilarious or inconceivably violent each story is rendered, the historical seeds of that story are factual. *Born a Crime* is non-fiction in the same way the 1927 Immorality Act of the epigraph might seem: that is, while they might both read like outlandish impossibilities, they are, in fact, horrific realities of history.

Part I: Chapters 1-8

These chapters offer a window into what it was like for Noah as a young child under apartheid. Part I delivers some context for the conflict between Zulu and Xhosa tribes in the late 1980s, but also the fierce resistance and aspiration of Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, Trevor’s mother. In this section, Noah recounts his isolation as a ‘mixed’ child, and the importance his mother placed upon family, discipline, religion, education and language, as ways to navigate intergenerational poverty and the ‘black tax’ (p. 66). Nombuyiselo’s aspirational resistance underpins this first part of the memoir, and the bond between mother and child is characterised as incredibly unique: it’s in the first part of the memoir that Noah reconstructs some of the horrors of living under apartheid and the indelible fortitude that bonds them together as ‘not just mother and son’. They ‘were a team’ (p. 69). The anomaly to this ‘early childhood’ part of the memoir is the chapter ‘Robert’, which builds towards the moment when he is reunited with his father after ten years at the age of twenty-four.

Part I: Questions for discussion

- Compare the foci for Chapters 1 and 8. Why does Noah bookend this section in this way?
- Why does Noah describe apartheid as ‘perfect racism’ (p. 19)?
- How is language used as a tool for survival in Part I?
- Why does Noah construct so many horrific stories in Part I, in a way that is humorous?
- Throughout Part I, how does Patricia prepare a very young Noah for ‘a life of freedom long before [they] knew freedom would exist’ (p. 74)?

Part II: Chapters 9-14

These chapters capture Noah's adolescence, through snapshots of his relationships and friendships. Navigating his problematic outsider status as a 'mixed' teenager, he begins to understand race as a construct and this underpins many of the anecdotes in this section of the text. His coming-of-age story is not only scarred by the perils of existing on the margins of categorisation, but by his terrifyingly abusive and erratic stepfather, Abel. While his 'overnight success' (p. 141) as a business-minded teen with a grasp of multiple languages reveals itself in this section of the text, the ever-present shame of poverty, and the trauma and violence of a post-apartheid South Africa, lingers across each chapter.

Part II: Questions for discussion

- In what ways does Noah reveal the division between different groups of people who are being victimised by apartheid?
- How does Noah come to understand that Abel is capable of acts of horrific violence? How does he learn that 'that's where the danger was' (p. 126)?
- How does living under the conditions of poverty both limit and embolden Noah as a child?
- How does being 'mixed-race' contribute to Noah's lack of a sense of belonging as a teenager?
- What do the 'Affairs of the Heart' chapters reveal about Noah's understanding of romantic relationships as a teenager?

Part III: Chapters 15-18

The final chapters offer insights into his burgeoning sense of independence and the distance that he starts to build between his mother's life and his own, primarily as a survival mechanism, but also as a part of his ongoing search for his own sense of belonging. Discovering the limitations of aspiration on the streets of Alexandra, despite the relief he seems to find in finally fitting in as one of many hustlers in what he refers to as the 'hood', leads to an acceptance that he has bigger opportunities beyond the 'ghetto'. Although he hits a ceiling in terms of his own education, and the unfairly stacked justice system as by-products of the patriarchy that underpins much of the cultural and structural racism in South Africa, he still manages to weave a dry and unwavering wit into this last part of the text. The final chapter is equal parts horror and joy. The entire story is appropriately bookended with a focus on his mother.

Part III : Questions for discussion

- How does Noah explore the role of education in the development of empathy for different cultural groups?
- Compare the townships of Alexandra and Soweto. Why is Noah so drawn to Alexandra as a young adult?
- How does Noah come to understand that he is 'more cheese than hood'(p. 224)?
- How much of Noah's aspirations as a young man is tied up with American pop culture and the myth of the American Dream?
- Compare the end of 'My Mother's Life' (p. 282) with the end of 'Run' (p. 17). What are the similarities and why do you think Noah ends these chapters in this way? How are they different?

The epilogue

Noah finishes the memoir, after the story of his mother's incredible survival of the violence committed on her by her husband, Trevor's stepfather Abel, with the lack of justice that is then played out in the courts.

> He didn't serve a single day in prison. He kept joint custody of his sons. He's walking around Johannesburg today, completely free. The last I heard he still lives somewhere around Highlands North, not too far from my mom (p. 284)

Epilogue: Questions for discussion

- Why is it important for Noah to attach this detail in the epilogue, rather than include it in the final chapter?
- How does structure offer opportunities for writers to reclaim the most important and meaningful aspects of their lives when writing memoir?
- What does Noah suggest about justice in a post-apartheid South Africa?

Non-linear structure

While the three parts of the memoir are loosely mapped out in a chronological form, the story can still be described as non-linear. A well-known French filmmaker, Jean Luc Godard, once said, 'A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.' (Potts, 2019)

How does the form of this memoir both subscribe to, and resist this idea?

Characters

Trevor Noah

Protagonist and narrator of *Born a Crime,* Trevor Noah is a well-known stand-up comedian and, at the time of writing this guide, the host of *The Daily Show,* an American satirical news program on Comedy Central. Born in 1984 to a Xhosa mother and a Swiss-German father in Johannesburg, Noah's narration traverses his childhood and coming of age at a politically frenzied time for apartheid in South Africa. His comedic storytelling style and his ability to reflect deeply upon his childhood without bitterness is astonishing. His relationships with those around him are rendered in rich detail in this text.

Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah

As stubborn as she is religious, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah ('Mbuyi' to her husband Abel) is Trevor's mother. A fierce Xhosa woman, she is characterised by Noah as 'never scared. Even when she should have been' (p. 13). The first and last chapters are given over to Noah's fierce adoration of his mother, to the humour that underpins so much of the horror, and to her unequivocal devotion to religion. Perhaps one of the most contradictory and troubling aspects of their relationship is the way she is so brutal in her discipline of a young Trevor. Regardless, the author employs his trademark sense of humour, rather than dwelling on these harsh modes of parenting. At various stages, Noah renders their relationship as cartoonish, comparing the two of them to 'Tom and Jerry' (p. 11) and their interactions as 'like a relationship between a cop and a criminal in the movies - the relentless detective and the devoted mastermind she's determined to catch'. He also characterises their relationship as one between 'bitter rivals' who nevertheless 'respect the hell out of each other' (p. 80). Ultimately, it is Nombuyiselo's refusal to 'be bound by ridiculous ideas about what black people could or shouldn't do' (p. 73) that inspires a young Trevor to succeed as an individual and reach beyond what his racial classification may have said was possible. Nombuyiselo means 'she who gives back' (p. 67). Nombuyiselo supports her abusive husband Abel until she can take no more and moves out with her two younger sons, Andrew and Isaac, a few years after Trevor has left home, before Abel's attempt at murdering her. The preface for 'My Mother's Life' sets it up as a bookend for Chapter 1, 'Run'. In both chapters, the central role of religion in Nombuyiselo's life anchors his retelling of incredibly violent and traumatic scenes. This chapter details some horrific abuse and should be handled with great care.

Robert

Noah's father, a Swiss German who settled in South Africa in the late 1970s, was 'a complete mystery' (p. 103) to him, even though they managed to have a relationship against lawful and societal circumstances. Noah names an entire chapter after him. The significance of this is layered: the title of the chapter is not 'dad', or 'father', but 'Robert', and this is perhaps emblematic of the fact that a young Trevor was 'instructed' never to call him dad as 'someone might have asked questions or called the police' (p. 104). Despite this required public distancing, Noah's father still earns himself a place in his story and it is clear that he feels great fondness for the man who opened one of the first racially integrated restaurants in South Africa. The fact that Robert 'never subscribed to any of the rules of apartheid' (p. 104) means his shared values with Noah's mother reach far beyond the odds that were stacked against his very existence.

Abel Ngisaveni Shingange

Trevor's step-father and father to both of Trevor's younger brothers, Andrew and Isaac, Abel is first referred to in Chapter 1 when Noah declares that 'Almost everything that has gone wrong in my life I can trace back to a secondhand car' (p. 9). Abel is Patricia's mechanic and this regular interaction develops into a relationship. Trevor is six years old when they start dating. His European name Abel, 'a name straight out of the Bible' and one that means 'the good brother, the good son', belies his traditional Tsonga name, Ngisaveni, which means 'be afraid' (p. 250). Abel's ongoing abuse of Trevor, and of his brothers and his mother, reaches a horrific climax in the final chapter when he shoots Patricia in the back of the head, in front of Trevor's two younger brothers. Abel's dependence on alcohol and the way that this plummets him into acts of domestic terror inspire constant fear in a young Trevor and eventually lead him to move out at age seventeen. The lessons that Trevor learns while coming of age in Part II of the memoir are unpacked with moments of great hilarity and insight; however, everything seems to unfold with a backdrop of Abel-inspired fear. In the epilogue, we learn the true extent to which patriarchal rule in South Africa will go to protect abusers (as recently as 2011) as Abel's crimes didn't require him to 'serve a single day in prison' (p. 284).

Andrew

Trevor's younger brother and son of Abel, Andrew is about eight years younger than Trevor. He first appears in the memoir in Chapter 1, as a baby – Patricia 'curled herself in a ball around him' and leaps from a moving minivan, in order to escape potential murder by a 'particularly angry' (p. 15) Zulu minibus driver. Andrew is a teenager when he witnesses his mother being shot by his father in 2009.

Isaac

Trevor's youngest brother is also fathered by Abel. When Trevor's mother discovers she is pregnant again, she is forty-four years old. Eighteen-year-old Trevor is incensed, 'boiling with rage' (p. 269), as he had decided that 'all we had to do was wait for Andrew to grow up and it was going to be over, and now it was liked she'd re-upped the contract' (p. 269). He is named Isaac 'because in the Bible Sarah gets pregnant when she is like 100 years old and she's not supposed to be having children and that's what she names her son' (p. 270). Isaac is about seven years old when he witnesses the attempted murder of his mother by his father, before being driven by Abel to an uncle's house.

Teddy

Trevor befriends Teddy at Sandringham, the school he attends from grade eight, and he describes their relationship as 'mayhem' (p. 153). Teddy is the son of a domestic worker living in the staff quarters in the wealthy suburb of Linksfield, near Sandringham. They spend their time 'walking all over Johannesburg together' (p. 154), with Saturday nights hanging out at The Balfour Park Shopping Mall. In the chapter 'Colorblind', Teddy is the black friend who gets caught shoplifting and despite being captured on CCTV, the camera exposure makes Trevor look white, so he doesn't get identified. Teddy gets expelled.

Tim

Friends with Trevor in his final years of school, Tim is the mastermind behind the Busta Rhymes and Spliff Star ruse and is also responsible for setting Trevor up with Babiki, who does not share any common languages with Trevor. Tim is 'always trying to cut a deal' and is one of two 'middlemen' working for Trevor in his CD business. As he attends a 'proper ghetto school' (p. 164), Trevor asks him to handle that market for his business.

Sizwe

The second of Trevor's two middlemen for his CD business in high school, Sizwe is described as 'a leader and protector of Township kids' (p. 203). The two sustain their friendship beyond school and Trevor continues to gravitate towards him, spending all of his time when he finishes school in Alexandra, where the two 'hang around outside his house on the low brick wall down the middle of Springbok Crescent, doing nothing, shooting the shit' (p. 206). What at first begins as a fascination with the 'hood and a sense that he finally belongs, becomes three years spent 'hanging out in that very spot' (p. 206) with Sizwe, selling pirated CDs. It is with Sizwe that Noah learns that there is a 'very fine line between civilian and criminal' (p. 209). Sizwe is very supportive of Trevor and helps him with his makeover for the matric dance. He is also the friend who champions Trevor's DJing skills and lets him know he is 'sitting on a gold mine' (p. 190). It is through Sizwe that Noah eventually recognises his own privilege in comparison to the young people who grew up in Alex: 'Sizwe and the other East Bank guys, because of where they were from, what they looked like – they just had very little hope.' (p. 224).

Daniel

Daniel is the white kid at Sandringham who Trevor works for as a middleman selling CDs, who eventually enables Trevor's CD business by giving him his CD writer, and therefore the means of production. Noah credits Daniel with 'changing [his] life' (p. 186). It is possible that if Noah had not been making money at the end of high school, he may not have been able to afford to escape his violent home. Noah reflects upon the 'give a man a fish' idea and insists that 'it would be nice if you gave him a fishing rod' (p. 190), which is exactly what Daniel does when he hands over the CD writer. Noah may not be alive today without this act of generosity.

Hitler

Hitler (his real name) is part of Sizwe and Trevor's dance crew and 'was a great friend' (p. 193). An excellent dancer, 'he was mesmerising to watch' (p. 193) and was the star attraction of their party bookings. Their whole DJ set was built around his performances. Hitler also acts as a vehicle for Noah to unpack what a black South African education looks like. His assertion that 'the name Hitler does not offend a black South African because Hitler is not the worst thing a black South African can imagine' (p. 195) will almost certainly raise some challenges in terms of writing and class discussion, and should be handled delicately and carefully, with full respect to the cultural backgrounds of all students.

Temperance Noah

Temperance Noah, Trevor's maternal grandfather, was 'The only semi-regular male figure in my life' (p. 35). Noah highlights the irony in his name as 'he was not a man of moderation at all' (p. 35). His descriptions of his grandfather paint a picture of a womaniser with a big personality who lived with his 'second family' in the Meadowlands. Before being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, it was thought that he was simply eccentric with 'wild mood swings' (p. 36). 'His nickname in Soweto was "Tat Shisha", which translates loosely to "the smokin hot grandpa". And that's exactly who he was.' (p. 35).

Frances Noah

Noah's grandmother 'was the family matriarch ... barely 5 feet tall ... but rock hard'. Noah characterises her as the opposite to his grandfather: 'calm, calculating, with a mind as sharp as anything' (p. 37). In the chapter 'Trevor, Pray', Noah describes his early years in Soweto as dominated by strong women, led by Frances.

Other family members in Soweto

Aunt Sibongile (Nombuyiselo's sister), Dinky (Sibongile's husband), Koko (his great grandmother), cousins Mlungisi and Bulelwa.

Maylene

The focus of his affectionate endeavours in the 'Affairs of the Heart: Part I', Maylene is the only coloured girl at H.A. Jack and delivers the first of his documented love lessons, in the context of Valentine's Day. He is twelve years old.

Zaheera

Based on his first love lesson where he 'learned that cool guys get girls, and funny guys get to hang out with the cool guys who get girls' (p. 146), he decides that he 'shouldn't even try' (p. 146). He carefully cultivates a connection with Zaheera based on friendship and decides he is simply going to have a crush on her forever. The love lesson that is delivered in 'Affairs of the Heart, Part II: The Crush,' is that playing the 'long game' is not always the best approach when it comes to romance.

Babiki

Babiki becomes the focus of his third love lesson, in 'Affairs of the Heart, Part III: The Dance'. It is his final year of high school and his friend Tim sets him up on a date for the matric dance with 'the most beautiful girl he has ever seen' (p. 168). He spends so much time making himself over and fantasising about this date that he forgets to actually speak with her in the weeks leading up to his big date. He only realises that on the night of the date that they have never had a conversation and that she only speaks Pedi – a language he doesn't speak. The date is a disaster.

Suggested classroom activities

- Using the dynamic map idea, ask students to locate each of the characters in a particular place with corresponding chapter numbers and quotes. Where are they from? Do they move? If so, where do they live at various stages of the memoir and which parts of the text do these homes correspond with? Which vignettes about which characters belong where? Again, this can be done digitally on the Padlet map function or can be done physically on a wall if teachers have access to wall space.
- Fake Instagram profiles – imagine Instagram existed when Trevor was a teenager. Set up fake Instagram profiles for Trevor, Tim, Teddy, Sizwe, Daniel, Maylene, Zaheera and Babiki. Students could use a Google Slides Fake Instagram template as a guide.

Issues and themes

Race

It is important to note that the language used in this Inside Stories guide, particularly around race, is inherently problematic. Words like 'coloured' and 'mixed-race' are labels that were very much a part of Noah's life in South Africa and are regularly adopted here as a part of describing his experience. It is important for teachers to have a conversation with students about how this kind of language, outside the context of the memoir, is deeply offensive to many. Students should be advised not to use these terms unless it is a part of a discussion about the way language about race was weaponised as a tool of apartheid.

Race underpins most of the ideas and issues in the text and South Africa built its white supremacist regime around divisions and constructs of race. The preface to 'Run' offers a distilled definition of apartheid in South Africa and sets up Noah's experiences as someone existing outside of the definitions and classifications of race in South Africa. Because of the Immorality Act of 1927 (detailed in the Epigraph), it was illegal to have mixed-race relationships, so he was never able to claim his identity as a 'mixed-race' child in those early years. His very existence was an anomaly that could not be acknowledged and was actively hidden. It is in the titular chapter of the memoir that the reader comes to understand that under apartheid in South Africa 'race-mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent' (p. 21). As a 'mixed' person, Noah 'embodies that rebuke to the logic of the system' and in doing so, becomes 'a crime worse than treason' (p. 21). It's in this chapter, too, that Noah offers insight into the isolation he experienced in those early years, when he needed to be hidden away, given that 'the wrong colour kid in the wrong colour area' meant that 'the government could come in, strip your parents of custody, haul you off to an orphanage' (p. 29). As a result of this, he reflects that 'he was good at being alone' (p. 30).

On the other hand, in 'Chameleon', Noah documents the benefits of a life where his 'grandmother treated [him] like [he] was white' (p. 52). Being mixed-race, he 'learned how easy it is for white people to get comfortable with a system that awards them all the perks' (p. 52), with his grandfather in Soweto even calling him 'Mastah' (Master) and insisting that he sit in the back of the car when he was being driven anywhere (p. 52).

While his first primary school, the Catholic school, Maryvale, 'was an oasis that kept [him] from the truth' (p. 56) because every clique was racially mixed, when he starts school at the end of grade six at H.A. Jack, 'it was like seeing [his] country for the first time ... people being together and yet not together, occupying the same space yet choosing not to associate with each other in any way' (p. 57). Indeed, being at H.A. Jack made him 'realise [he] was black' (p. 59).

The preface to 'The Mulberry Tree' outlines the 'tangled web of "other"' (p. 115) that defines the history and limitations placed upon those classified as 'coloured' in South Africa, when it comes to asserting their identity. Because Trevor is a 'mixed person', he is often 'classified' by others as 'coloured' which is problematic in so far as his cultural background and his mother's family; he identifies as 'black', but 'does not look black' by the apartheid definition of this category. The colour of his skin is further complicated by the multiple languages he speaks. The way that others perceive him – those classified as 'black' and those classified as 'coloured' – while he is growing up, consistently highlights the sense that he 'was the anomaly wherever [he] lived' (p. 117). In Hillboro, living in a white area, 'nobody liked' him; likewise, in Soweto, which was a 'black area'. Even in Eden Park, which was a 'coloured area ... everyone looked like [him] but [he] couldn't be more different' (p. 117).

He documents the fact that he is consistently seen as a 'fellow tribe member attempting to disavow the tribe' (p. 118) in Eden Park, where he encountered 'two types of coloured people. Some coloured people hated [him] because of [his] blackness' (p. 120) and his love for African languages. They would ask him 'Why do you speak that click-click language? Look at your light skin. You're almost there and you're throwing it away.' (p. 121). Others 'hated [him] for [his] whiteness' (p. 121). His attendance at Maryvale and white church, and the fact that he spoke 'perfect English and ... barely spoke Afrikaans, the language coloured people were supposed to speak' presented him to others as seeing himself as better than them, so they would mock him for 'putting on airs' (p. 121) that were beyond what they perceived to be his racial classification. It is here that the tragedy of apartheid, and the way that the system pits one marginalised group against another in order to make different groups complicit in processes of subjugation as an act of self-preservation, becomes evident in the day-to-day lives of a mixed-race child.

In ‘Colourblind’, Noah unpacks the contradictory nature of categorisations of people based on race through his misadventures with his best friend Teddy, with whom he had become ‘thick as thieves’ (p. 153), in part, because they were ‘both naughty as shit’ (p. 154). Trevor finally finds ‘someone who made [him] feel normal’ (p. 153) but when Teddy gets arrested for shoplifting and Trevor escapes the same fate by running away, the ridiculous tragedy of these young men being defined by the colour of their skin becomes clear to Trevor, who observes that ‘these people had been 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’ (p. 159). When the CCTV camera ‘can’t expose for light and dark at the same time ... and picks [him] as white’ (p. 158), Trevor is horrified by their inability to see the person ‘sitting right in front of them’ as the culprit, before seeing the overexposed skin colour of the perpetrator on the screen. He is aghast that he facing off with the police and the principal of his school, being asked if he knows who the white boy is with Teddy. He remarks: ‘If you looked closely: It was me. I was Teddy’s best friend. I was Teddy’s only friend. I was the single most likely accomplice ... at a certain point, I felt so invisible I almost wanted to take credit.’ (p. 159).

As far as comments on race, history and the importance of an education informed by critical thinking go, Chapter 15, ‘Go Hitler!’, is as problematic as it sounds. This chapter needs to be handled with great care and sensitivity, with a focus on the role of education in the lives of those growing up black in South Africa. Like many of Noah’s stories, the ‘punchline’ is punctuated by a horrific sense of injustice. That many students will find this chapter amusing needs to be understood at the outset; likewise, there will be students that find the discomfort, humour, and the lack of resolution in this chapter, unbearably offensive. The advice to teachers here is to tread carefully and understand the full range of reactions that might be elicited by a chapter named ‘Go Hitler!’ about a black South African breakdancer named Hitler (by his parents), visiting the Jewish King David School for a ‘cultural program for schools’ with the premise that in post-apartheid South Africa, people were ‘supposed to be learning about and embracing one another’ (p. 96). There is more detailed commentary on this chapter in the **Themes** section titled **Education** and some extra resources for unpacking its context can be found in the **References** section of this guide.

In ‘The world doesn’t love you’, Noah discovers that his outsider status makes arming himself against possible threats in jail, through an alignment with a particular racial group, impossible. Given that he ‘knows that [he is] black and [he] identif[ies] as black, but [he is] not a black person on the face of it’ (p. 240), he finds himself once more adopting the disguise of a ‘chameleon’ in order to ‘navigate between two groups, explain[ing] who [he] was’ (p. 240).

The impact of the racist regime under apartheid with regard to poverty, violence, justice, language, gender and education are undoubtable and students will find it very difficult to untangle these intersecting issues. Keeping in mind the need for grouping text knowledge around specific themes when teaching text, it’s also important that this thematic intersection and overlap is acknowledged when studying this text. Racism underpins many of the other ideas that emerge as a part of this study.

Violence

In ‘The Mulberry Tree’, Noah admits that he ‘was used to being bullied’ (p. 122) and this chapter also recounts the repercussions that Abel enacts upon a local ‘coloured’ child who bullies Noah. While Trevor admits to knowing exactly what to say ‘to get the monster on [his] side’ (p. 124), acknowledging that Abel’s beating of this child ‘satisfies a thirst’ (p. 125) for revenge in him, the ‘instant’ where Abel oversteps from revenge for Noah to being a ‘grown man venting his rage on a 12 year old boy’ (p. 125), has the effect of showing a young Trevor how much he and the boy ‘had in common’ and he knew he’d ‘done a terrible thing’ (p. 125) by invoking Abel’s rage.

Noah’s question, ‘Who had bullied him that he needed to bully me?’ (p. 125), seems to stretch beyond this incident and across the divisions and brutality that existed because of apartheid and the hierarchy of classifications that came with it. In a society of segregation and racial classification, everyone is getting bullied by someone, and the need to find an outlet for the anger that stems from this results in further violence.

‘Loopholes’ asserts both Trevor’s intelligence and his defiance and these are two qualities that get him in and out of trouble at school, and with his mother who is ‘old school’ when it comes to discipline. (p. 84). This chapter is not the only part of the text where Trevor acknowledges that her discipline comes ‘from a place of love’ (p. 84) but a discussion around intergenerational violence, and the fear and brutality of living as a black person under apartheid and how that might translate in family relationships, is required when reflecting on this chapter. Noah plays down the discipline he receives from his mother and this requires some delicate discussion by teachers. Apartheid created a world of arbitrary racism and violence, along with intergenerational poverty, but Noah weaves in the significance of a loving mother, of the ability to choose risk, to laugh and to practise faith, in facing off against the perils of a South Africa that was stacked against him and those he loved. His mother’s acts of violence against him are placed in the context of a threat of worse violence: ‘When I beat you’ she says, ‘I’m trying to save you. When [the police] beat you, they’re trying to kill you’ (p. 243). Noah articulates that there is a big difference between the beatings he received as a child from Abel, and the punishments he receives from his mother. With Abel, Noah asserts, ‘It wasn’t discipline. Nothing about it was coming from a place of love’ (p. 263).

Moreover, the constant threat of violence, that looms like a shadow over Noah as he grows up in various parts of South Africa, is described as simultaneously horrific and everyday. From as young as five years old, Noah remembers that ‘nobody ran like me and my mom’ (p. 16). He reflects that ‘it was animal instinct, learned in a world where violence was always lurking and waiting to erupt’ (p. 16). In the opening chapter, Noah reflects that ‘death was never far away from anybody back then’ (p. 15). Despite all of the violence, Trevor sees himself as someone who doesn’t ‘hold onto trauma’ (p. 90) and it’s perhaps this ability to move beyond the horrors of his own childhood that propel him forward. This, and his mother’s determination to expose Trevor to ‘a different world than the one she grew up with’ (p. 262), mean that he is able to break the cycle of violence. Even though Trevor ‘grew up in a world of violence’ he himself ‘was never violent at all ... [he] never hit anyone. [He] just didn’t see himself that way.’ (p. 262).

Gender

In ‘Trevor, Pray’, Noah sketches a detailed picture of what it was like growing up in Soweto, surrounded by the formidable women in his family, where ‘religion filled the void left by absent men’ (p. 39). He articulates the contradictions inherent in a ‘world run by women’ (p. 38) in a nation where, even though they ‘held the community together’, things were very different in the domestic space, where ‘they were expected to submit and obey’ (p. 39). In the final chapter, ‘My Mother’s Life’, Noah circles back to the rather understated detail on page 9 of his mother being shot in the back of the head by her partner Abel. It is here that Noah brings together many of the threads that are traumatic products of a society still emerging from systems of oppression, along with the tools that he has been able to tap into in order to survive that trauma. The final vignette sews together thematic explorations in the memoir with perhaps the most violent and heartbreaking story of all; when his stepfather tries to kill his mother by shooting her in the back of the head.

In the lead-up to this moment, Noah recounts his stepfather’s frustration with Nombuyselo, who refused ‘to play her traditional role’ (p. 251) in ‘a world where women must bow when they greet a man’ (p. 250). Indeed, Nombuyiselo ‘loathed every minute’ of visiting Abel’s traditional Tsonga family, and even ‘made a mockery of it’ (p. 251).

Noah, at times, also falls into damagingly patriarchal ways of thinking – about his mother, but also about the young women in his orbit. Acknowledging the blame that becomes central to his understanding of his mother’s need to stay, Noah asserts, ‘I hated him, but I blamed her.’ (p. 271). This kind of blame, which is central to the misogyny that prevents women from accessing support for domestic violence the world over – even when it is available to them – is eventually acknowledged by Noah when he writes ‘it is so easy, from the outside, to put the blame on the woman and say, “You just need to leave”’ (p. 272). In fact, it’s only really when his mother explains that ‘if I leave he’ll kill us.’ (p. 272), that the tragedy and gravity of her entrapment and abuse become real to Noah, and by extension, to the reader. Up until this point, we, too, may be asking ‘why does she stay?’ The tragedy of joint forces that are apartheid, intergenerational violence, patriarchal expectation, poverty and substance abuse reaches its awful crescendo at the end of the novel. Noah finally reflects that ‘We were victims, me and my mom, Andrew and Isaac. Victims of apartheid. Victims of abuse.’ (p. 271).

In ‘The Cheese Boys’, Noah recounts many of his money-making schemes and the deals he and Sizwe made with ‘crackheads’, minibus drivers, and mothers of beautiful young women. One of these schemes involves a very problematic acquisition of power through a loan to one of the ‘moms in the hood’ who was ‘protective of their daughters’ (p. 215), but who also needed to borrow money. Using the fact that she hadn’t paid them back as leverage, the two young men end up with two cases of beer from a potential suitor and manipulate the mother into letting them take her daughter to a party. There seems to be a gleeful dismissal of the fact that a young woman is being traded as the young men work ‘angles’, when

Noah boasts, 'The guy would bring the beer, he'd get to hang out with the girl, we'd write off the mom's debt to show her our gratitude, and we'd make our money back selling the beer' (p. 216). The lack of irony in Noah's descriptions of this deal suggests his own subscription to a patriarchal idea that women can be traded for profit. It's perhaps one of the more problematic scenes, portraying a young Trevor Noah in a particularly negative light, if viewed through the lens of a feminist perspective.

To be fair, a young Trevor had very few male role models in his life. Stepping the reader through the history of Trevor's parents' coupling in the context of apartheid, Noah describes their friendship, and the fact that Patricia 'wanted a child, not a man stepping in to run her life' (p. 26). Apart from detailing how she met Noah's father, there are very few details about his role in Noah's life after his birth. Robert is unnamed until the chapter 'Robert' and the lack of knowledge he has about his father is poignantly captured in the first line: 'My father is a complete mystery' (p. 103). The 'one thing' that Noah knows about his father with any certainty is that 'he hates racism and homogeneity more than anything' (p. 104).

The chapter 'Robert' documents the story of reuniting with his father as an adult after ten years, 'a person I knew and yet did not know at all' (p. 109). Regardless of their time apart,'this ten-year gap closed right up in an instant' (p. 109) and he acknowledges that 'Circumstance had pulled us apart, but he was never not my father' (p. 110). Sadly, this idea of circumstance weighs heavily on their relationship and is in part political, as apartheid made it difficult for them to be together in those early years. Once apartheid ended, the possibility of Noah and his father sharing time together was extinguished as he and his mother were 'living under another kind of tyranny, that of an abusive, alcoholic man.' (p. 107). Significantly, Noah also names his grandfather as 'the only semi-regular male figure in my life' (p. 35) in his childhood. Noah's grandfather Temperance was not exactly a bastion of respect when it came to women.

Education

In the preface to 'Go Hitler!', Noah carefully establishes the foundation for the awful misunderstanding at the end of this chapter, pinpointing the lack of critical engagement with history that was a part of his education. He acknowledges that his education at Sandringham, despite being more thorough than that of the 'typical black kids in the townships' (p. 195), was devoid of any kind of critical thinking about 'Hitler and anti-Semitism and the Holocaust' (p. 195). He goes on to explain that at his school, he was not taught that 'the architects of apartheid ... and the racist policies they put in place were inspired, in part by the racist policies of Hitler and the Third Reich' (p. 195). The fact that in South African schools, students 'weren't being taught to think, period' (p. 195), is central to the way he sets up this particular story. So, too, the notion that even though 'Black people chose their traditional names with great care' (p. 194) and that they carry deeply personal meanings, they feel less inclined to consider deeply the English and European names that they were expected to also adopt since colonial times. They were required to have a 'name that white people could pronounce' (p. 194). He describes the fact that 'nine times out of ten, your European name was chosen at random, plucked from the Bible or taken from a Hollywood celebrity or famous politician' (p. 194). This meant that he knew 'guys named after Mussolini and Napoleon. And of course, Hitler' (p. 194).

Naming a child 'Hitler', he asserts, is not a way for black South Africans to honour the evil historical dictator, but rather 'a case of the West reaping what it has sown' (p. 194) in the form of poor education and the colonial imposition of a Western-sounding name. The idea that a black person from an uneducated family in a South African township has the name Hitler – as the result of a colonial cultural imposition from the West – can then be accused of racism, is the focus of this chapter. It is delivered with humour that could be interpreted as distasteful and offensive, but it's important to recognise the tangle of horrors that weave their way through this anecdote.

Perhaps one of the most potentially controversial elements of this chapter is Noah's handling of the Holocaust in relation to the historical atrocities in various parts of Africa. The notion that 'it's harder to be horrified by a guess' (p. 195) in relation to the genocide of African peoples throughout history, in comparison to the detailed records kept by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust, requires considerable sensitivity in its unpacking, with very careful consideration of audience.

Language

In the chapter 'Chameleon', Noah recounts his awakening to the power of learning many languages and figures out 'that the quickest way to bridge the race gap was through language' (p. 54). Languages enable him to move between social and racial groups even though he admits that where race is concerned, 'at some point life will force you to pick a side' (p. 57). He acknowledges that in South Africa, as he is growing up, 'English is the language of money. English comprehension is equated with intelligence.' (p. 54).

Afrikaans is useful in order to 'know the language of your oppressor' (p. 55) and 'language, even more than colour, defines who you are to people' (p. 56). The idea of language being both a uniting and divisive factor in his life is in part due to his grasp of so many languages.

Despite the challenges he faces that are due to the construct of race, Noah also draws the connection between shared language and empathy, describing his commitment to speaking with as many people as possible on their terms: 'Maybe I didn't look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you.' (p. 56). It is at H.A. Jack that his 'language thing', his ability to speak multiple languages, and especially his ability to speak African languages with the black children, 'endeared' him to a range of cultural groups (p. 58). Noah also finds that his ability to speak multiple languages offers the possibility for more compassionate relationships. Even in jail, in the chapter 'The World doesn't love you', his encounter with the 'Hulk', which at first inspires fear because of the man's imposing and threatening physical appearance, shifts to empathy and understanding once he realises his knowledge of both Tsonga and Zulu might be of use to the man. He notes that 'The second I spoke to him, this face that had seemed so threatening and mean, lit up with gratitude.' (p. 237). This moment echoes Nelson Mandela's sentiment that 'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to a man in his language, it goes to his heart.' (p. 236).

Humour

'Trevor, Pray' also details the hilarious story of a very young Trevor discovering that 'you are never more yourself than when you are taking a shit.' (p. 43). While the story is very funny, it is profound in its observations about the horrendous deprivations of human rights that go hand in hand with poverty in Soweto; freedoms that are taken for granted by most people were not a part of everyday life for his family, and families like his.

Somehow, Noah ends the tragic story in 'My Mother's Life' with a shared moment of levity and mother-to-son teasing, as they 'bawl[ed their] eyes out and laugh[ed] hysterically at the same time' (p. 282) over the possibility that he may now be the best looking in the family. The chapter winds up with an example of what makes so much of the horror bearable as a reader of this text; the ability to mine the tragic for comedic possibility. They are 'laughing together through the pain' (p. 282), just as they do through all of the moments that seem too relentlessly devastating for most of us to imagine, let alone find funny.

Defiance

Patricia's conscious decision to fall pregnant to a white man during the final years of apartheid is indicative of her fearless rebelliousness, her aspirations, and her determination for a better future for her child. Indeed, 'she had a level of fearlessness that you have to possess to take on something like she did.' (p. 22). Having said that, when they were together in public, there was always the chance that 'if the police showed up, she would have to drop me and pretend I wasn't hers, like a bag of weed.' (p. 28). This is one of the many moments that show how Noah navigates his problematic identity with great comedic effect. Risk is ever present. Much of Noah's childhood was spent ducking and weaving in between rules, getting himself out of trouble and negotiating his way around situations and scenarios that were impossibly (and sometimes brutally) unfair while making no sense to him at all. For Noah, 'in [his] mind, [he] wasn't breaking the rules, because the rules didn't make any sense.' (p. 86).

Much of the chapter 'Loopholes' looks at Noah's misbehaviour and misadventure and his mother's (and his Catholic school's) reactions to these. The preface, and the title, infer a parallel between these humorous misadventures and his mother's willingness to defy apartheid and find the loopholes in the system that enable her and Trevor to 'challenge authority and question the system' (p. 88), but also stay alive. His assertion that 'Catholic school is similar to apartheid in that it is ruthlessly authoritarian, and its authority rests on a bunch of rules that don't make any sense' (p. 88) is at the heart of this chapter and his stories of negotiation with his mother when he is a child, particularly through letters debating his stance on matters, reveal his determination to present his own position on a variety of issues with deft rhetorical skill. This, too, can be seen as a by-product of living under a system that lacks the same kind of logic. He insists that as a child he 'was just high energy and knew what [he] wanted to do' (p. 78), explaining that 'from an adult's point of view, I was destructive and out of control ... I never wanted to destroy, I wanted to create.' (p. 79). His very existence, as is attested in the titular chapter, is completely defiant and signifies the illogical and arbitrary laws of apartheid. He is indeed a human 'loophole' under the regime.

Affairs of the Heart

The preface to 'Fufi' reveals the irony of perceptions about which lives should be valued in the eyes of white people, according to Noah. While Chapter 7 does not really explore this further, what he does explore is the idea that pets and animals teach us a great deal about the nature of love. The chapter is named after his pet dog and recounts the story of a deaf Fufi going on daytime adventures and visiting another family, in turn breaking Noah's heart. He also articulates the way animals help shape lessons about co-dependence and love when he remarks 'Fufi was my first heartbreak' (p. 100). It is clear that the ease with which Fufi is able to live a double life informs an important lesson about respecting boundaries in romantic relationships. The experience 'shaped' what he feels 'about relationships for the rest of [his] life. You do not own the thing that you love' (p. 100).

'Affairs of the Heart, Part I' is the first part of a mini trilogy that documents Noah's romantic coming of age. Part I looks at how racial hierarchies in South Africa play a role in the way young people identify with each other romantically, and in the way children see themselves in comparison to others. The comparison between the preface to this chapter, where he describes his mother teaching him about adult relationships, including the role of foreplay in sex, and his awkward awakening to the potential for romance on Valentine's Day in the rest of the chapter, speaks to the divide between his mother's expectations of him and his limited experiences. Even though his mother offers 'little lessons, little talks, pieces of advice' he remarks that he 'never understood ... because [he] was a kid' (p. 128). Her focus on what a man should do and be seems to negate the fact that Trevor is a young child and has no context for some of the details she offers, such as 'don't forget: You're having sex with a woman in her mind before you're having sex with her in her vagina' (p. 128). Indeed, in 'Affairs of the Heart, Part I', it would seem that he gains more from his previous lesson about Fufi's adventures than his mother's advice. He accepts Maylene's rejection of him as making 'sense' (p. 133). In part, this is because she chooses the popular white kid, but also, it would seem, because he has learned not to be possessive.

In Part II of Noah's 'affairs of the heart' romantic coming of age trilogy, he establishes himself as a teenager to which 'puberty was not kind' (p. 145). By his own description, he 'was ugly' (p. 145) and was 'stuck being a clown' (p. 146). He continues on from Part I where he articulates 'the natural order of things' that informs his reluctance to even try to 'get a girl' (p. 146). This reluctance and his 'cultivat[ion]' of himself 'as the funny, non-threatening guy' (p. 147) is what leads to the regret articulated in the preface. He decides that in order to win the affection of Zaheera, who he 'thought about constantly, but ... never considered himself worthy of dating' (p. 147), he needs to 'play the long game'(p. 147). In this way, it seems he spends so much time working his way into her mind, on his mother's advice, that he is unaware that she 'had such a huge crush' (p. 149) on him.

As far as the 'Affairs of the Heart' chapters offer lessons in adolescent romance, Part III puts forward very specific advice on the importance of effective communication. By the time he reaches his matriculation, Trevor secures a date with Babiki, 'the most beautiful girl [he had] ever seen' (p. 168). This coupling seems to emulate the opposite side of the connection spectrum to Zaheera, as he completely neglects to engage with her on any level beyond being dumbstruck by her beauty. He is so overwhelmed by her physical presence that he is 'dumbfounded', admitting he had 'no idea how to talk to a girl that beautiful' (p. 168). The irony of the timing of his mother's advice when he was much younger is not lost on the reader: 'She was so preoccupied with teaching me how to be a man that she never taught me how to be a boy' (p. 127).

Noah sets up the impending date to the matric dance with an anecdote about his friend Tim, 'a real hustler' (p. 164), who manages to promote and sell tickets to a live music performance by American rapper Busta Rhymes, to be held at Hammanskraal before manipulating Trevor onto stage to 'stumble through some Busta Rhymes lyrics that [he] made up as [he] went along' (p. 166). Reassuring Trevor that 'it doesn't matter, these people don't speak English' and insisting beforehand that Trevor wear his Timberlands, an iconic brand of boots worn by American rappers at the time, the two manage to get away with convincing their audience that they had indeed bought tickets to see the famous rapper.

By threading the two stories together, Noah makes a comment about his absolute naiveté in some situations and the way that language barriers can be used to manipulate people. Trevor's bewilderment about 'another strange ritual [he] didn't understand' (the end of year dance) is in part due to his education from American movies, which have given him the impression that 'prom is where it happens. You lose your virginity' (p. 164). In 'Affairs of the Heart, Part III' it seems that he is so focused on his own makeover which is just like 'the makeover scenes in [his] American movies' (p. 173), Babiki's beauty, and the rite of passage itself, that he overlooks a fundamental method of connection with his date: speaking and listening. The disastrous end to the date seals the humiliation of his final lesson: don't be so 'mesmerised' by 'the idea' of a person that you end up not talking to her (p. 177).

Poverty

It's in 'The Second Child' that Noah introduces the concept of what his mother calls the 'black tax', the cost to black families who '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.'(p. 66). Despite her own experiences, Patricia is determined that Trevor will grow up without being heavily taxed by the horrific living conditions of her own childhood, telling him: 'I'm going to give you everything I never had' (p. 71). Despite how very poor they were, Patricia insists that 'even if he never leaves the ghetto, he will know that the ghetto is not the world' (p. 74).

Still, his outsider status as a mixed-race child continues as 'to the extent the groupings were racial, it was because of the ways race overlapped class and geography in the real world'. (p. 138). This meant that even among the group he identified with most closely, the poor black kids, he was still an outsider as those children lived far away in the townships and, at this point, he lived in the white suburbs, making it impossible to form an endearing connection beyond school hours. His mother's aspirations for the two of them worked to exclude him from those he identified with most closely and in a way, these aspirations prevented him from a true sense of belonging. Despite its racially mixed enrolments, Trevor was still 'the only mixed kid out of a thousand' (p. 138) at Sandringham High School, and given the geographical distance from poor black kids, the sense of displacement that underscored his entire existence continues to require him to create his 'own strange little world' (p. 139). His outsider status is cemented by the fact that he lives under the conditions of acute poverty, but also lives in suburbs that are more privileged than those of township kids. His experience of being poor, and his need to carve out his own reality as an outsider, lead him to what he describes as his 'niche', a role that enables him to 'move seamlessly between groups' (p. 140), being 'everywhere with everybody, and at the same time [he] was all by [him]self' (p. 141). It can be argued that it is Noah's experience of living with very little that drives his hunger to make a living for himself at a very young age, propelling him to developing a shrewd 'instinct for business' and becoming a 'natural capitalist' (p. 187).

Aspiration and place

Noah is nostalgic about the 'magical' atmosphere of Soweto, asserting that 'it was a prison designed by our oppressors, but it also gave us a sense of self determination and control.' (p. 40). The contradictions of 'old' and 'new' that he describes in the preface to 'Trevor, Pray' not only refer to the roles of women, but to the hope that exists in a place that simultaneously traps people while allowing for aspirations and dreams of transformation.

In 'Cheese boys', Noah also explains the mechanisms that determine belonging in the township of Alexandra (Alex). He establishes the fact that when he first went to Alex, he was 'drawn to the excitement of it, but more importantly, [he] was accepted there, more than [he'd] been in high school or anywhere else' (p. 218). This is despite the fact that 'the place was called Gomorrah for a reason' (p. 204). His enduring bond with Sizwe is cemented via their combined efforts on 'the hustle' and his adventures and conquests are underscored by the insight that he 'was seventeen, and by that point life at home had become toxic because of [his] stepfather' (p. 207). Noah seems to find comfort in Alex and for 'the first time in his life', despite the fact that he does not live in Alex and is 'technically an outsider in the hood', he 'didn't feel like one' (p. 218). He recounts the elements of Alex that appealed to his young and newly independent spirit: his friendship with Sizwe – 'Sizwe was one of those people ... sort of the leader and protector of the township kids' (p. 204); pop culture – 'Hip-hop made it cool to be from the hood' (p. 204); and the visceral energy of the place – 'a complete sensory overload' (p. 206). He finds great comfort in the fact that 'within the chaos there was order, a system, a social hierarchy based on where you lived' (p. 206) and navigates the 'very fine line between civilian and criminal' (p. 209).

Despite his love of many of the places he grew up in, Noah admits that 'once [he] had a taste of America, [he] never ate at home' (p. 189). Throughout the memoir there are frequent references to his love of all things American. Music, McDonalds, Hip Hop culture, films and TV shows, fashion and music from America dominate his psyche as a teenager. Unsurprisingly, he seems more enamoured with the spoils of American culture than he does with the end of apartheid, when he remarks, 'with Mandela came freedom. And with freedom came McDonald's' (p. 189). In 'Affairs of the Heart, Part I', Noah acknowledges the power of American popular culture, and its accompanying capitalistic values, when he notes that the moment he asks Maylene to be his Valentine is 'perfect' because 'it was right outside McDonald's' (p. 132). This foreshadows much of the value that a young Trevor places on the things he sees as representative of success and the American Dream, both cultural and economic. Noah's 'long game' in 'Affairs of the Heart, Part II' is also inspired by American pop culture. He had 'seen American high school movies', where 'you hang around long enough as the friendly good guy and the girl dates a bunch of handsome jerks', before one day turning around to decide that it was Trevor she 'was supposed to be with all along' (p. 148). The fact that Zaheera leaves with her family for a life in America, without saying goodbye, is a bitter irony. The anecdotes that circle around his Timberlands, Spliff Star and Buster Rhymes (p. 165), Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* and his floor-length leather jacket (p. 171), Nikes (p. 212), Jordans (p. 216), KFC, Burger King, and of course, McDonalds (p. 205), DMX, Montell Jordan, Nirvana (p. 187), saturate the text with a reverence for all things American. It is perhaps fair to assume that so much of Noah's affinity with American popular culture as a teenager lies with the fact that in his early childhood, he 'grew up in a home with very little exposure to popular culture' (p. 7). Be this the result of the conditions of living in extreme poverty, or under the influence of an incredibly pious matriarchy, it is clear that the things he was denied early in life come into razor sharp focus as he grows up. It's also worth noting that the entire first chapter hinges on an opening that begins, 'Sometimes in big Hollywood movies ...' (p. 5). That Noah ends up living in America, hosting an American TV show himself, is no surprise.

In 'The Second Girl', Noah documents his mother's childhood history and reveals how it is she came to be so aspirational for herself and her children. There are parallels that can be drawn between her disposition as a child and that of her son, as she 'was the problem child, a tomboy, stubborn, defiant' (p. 64) and he is 'a product of her search for belonging' (p. 63). Perhaps the most fundamental difference between Trevor and his mother is that she was 'unwanted' as 'the second girl' (p. 64). Trevor's own upbringing is indeed very difficult and dominated by the experience of being poor but his mother's childhood left her with 'one goal ... to free [his] mind' (p. 68), and in doing so, afford him the opportunities she never had growing up. Her aspirations for her son stem from growing up 'without food or shoes or even underwear' (p. 65).

Language and style

Comedy

Although much of the memoir involves re-tellings of some horrific moments in history, and personal experiences of racism and poverty, Noah chooses to deliver these stories in an informal, often comedic, register. The first-person narrative voice is conversational at times, as he unpacks some of the inner workings of his mind in moments of reflection, as well as making clear his propensity for irony and sarcasm even as a young child. Often, these moments are revealed through italics, for example, in 'Run', he mocks the Hollywood depictions of jumping out of a moving car when he makes the aside: 'Whenever I see that I think, *That's rubbish. Getting thrown out of a moving car hurts way worse than that.'* (p. 5). These moments are often filled with colloquialisms, slang and, occasionally, swearing. He regularly works to use these moments to capture the voice of his childhood self. For example, when he reflects on his observations of his mother when he was a child, he includes the memories in the voice of a young Trevor: *'Okay, she's in turbo mode now.'* (p. 11); 'I'd be like, *Lady, clearly you do not know what kind of stories to be telling a ten-year-old.'* (p. 66). The informal tone is captured throughout the text, again, often through the use of italics for emphasis: 'Wait, *what?* You mean we could have *left?* That was an *option?'* (p. 31). In these moments, anyone familiar with Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy might notice these points of emphasis, offering potential for the kind of intonation that would be suitable to a performance where the goal is to make the audience, i.e. the reader, laugh.

Part of the richness and irony of Noah's comedic style is his ability to work against the emotional detail of a story, somehow building incredibly funny details into scenes and events that are completely devastating. Comedy is a stylistic choice, but it is also a way for him to process some of the horrors of his life. It serves a purpose beyond making the reader laugh. His ability to tell these stories relies on his sense of humour.

Suggested classroom activity

- Identify five moments when Trevor's comedic narration seems to downplay or minimise the enormity of what is happening in the story. How does it shape the way we read those sections of the text? How would our reading of these moments change without the humour?

Nomenclature

Noah uses names, and their meanings, to help characterise and flesh out the personality traits of members of his family. The origins of his own name are also interesting and the connections between his mother's intentions when naming him, and his aspirations to break away from a life of poverty and disadvantage, are eerily in sync. In Chapter 5, 'The Second Girl', Noah explains that his mother 'was determined' that his 'childhood would bear no resemblance to hers' (p. 67). As a part of that mission, 'she started with [his] name' (p. 67).

In this chapter, Noah details the process of naming in Xhosa families and articulates the belief that 'the names Xhosa families give their children always have a meaning' that is 'self-fulfilling'. After documenting the aptly self-fulfilling names of his cousin Mlungisi ('The Fixer') and uncle Velile ('He Who Popped Out of Nowhere'), he details the meaning of his mother's name: 'She Who Gives Back' (p. 67). Nombuyiselo, Patricia's Xhosa name, directly relates to the idea of the 'black tax' and the idea that she lived under the shadow of intergenerational poverty and oppression. She is compelled to 'spend all of her time trying to fix the problems of the past' (p. 66) by reinventing herself. She is committed to laying the foundations for her son that will prevent him from needing to do the same and names him Trevor in defiance of family precedence. Patricia 'wanted her child to be beholden to no fate. She wanted [him] to be free to go anywhere, do anything, be anyone' (p. 67). In departing from a name that might prophesy character, Patricia's first move to uncouple Trevor from the shackles of her own life might be symbolic, but it is uncanny in the way that Trevor's life plays out. Through names, Noah shows that an individual's potential may need to be freed from traditional expectations and acquiescence, in order to be fully realised.

The inclusion of the story about his friend Hitler can also be seen as an intentional exploration of the way that labels can carry the weight of damaging meaning. The notion that these labels come with their own cultural signifiers mirrors the arbitrary nature of racial classification and naming too. Simply by naming Noah 'Trevor', in a way, Patricia frees him from the constraints of a Xhosa identity. Noah could be suggesting here that without the culturally constructed labels, 'black', 'coloured', 'mixed-race' and 'white', the limitations of cultural identity can be dismantled and space can be made for individuals to 'be anyone'.

Suggested classroom activity

- Have students do an Internet search of Xhosa names and their meanings. What might Patricia have named Trevor, had she decided to give him a Xhosa name?

Narration

Noah's narration places him in the text as a character, too. He is not simply observing, recalling or retelling. His voice is at once confessional, complicated and loaded with the qualities of any fully fleshed-out fictional central character. Much of this is due to the layers of irony and wit he builds into his own voice. He captures the essence of the characters he includes through sensory detail, giving an authentic voice to Trevor the nine-year-old just as effectively as he embodies his seventeen-year-old self.

Suggested classroom activity

- Have students reflect on an early childhood memory. Ask them to spend a few minutes capturing the voice of their much younger self. Discuss the challenges of writing from a younger child's perspective.

Figurative language

Noah's 'animal instinct, learned in a world where violence was always lurking and ready to erupt' (p. 16) foreshadows the way he characterises his relationship with Abel later in the text. While Noah 'just knew what to do ... like a gazelle runs from the lion, [he] ran' (p. 16), later, in 'My Mother's Life', Noah frequently compares Abel to an animal when he recounts that he 'enjoyed being with Abel in the same way [he] enjoyed playing with a tiger cub' (p. 249). In addition, he 'always thought of Abel as a cobra: calm, perfectly still, then explosive' (p. 254). By likening his stepfather to different animals, Noah evokes the energy of the violence he witnessed and was subjected to. Likewise, Noah describes living 'like a mouse in that house' (p. 264), constantly in fear of seeing 'the dragon emerge' (p. 266). In these moments, it is difficult not to see the parallels between the dehumanisation of black South Africans as a part of the process of apartheid, and Noah's own perceptions of the behaviours of those so brutally oppressed. Abel is clearly a product of the 'extremely patriarchal' Tsonga culture (p. 250), and lives up to his Tsonga name Ngisaveni, which 'means "be afraid"' (p. 250), but he is also the victim of a dehumanising racist regime himself, and this is reflected in Noah's comparisons.

Suggested classroom activity

- Have students choose a colour, a song and an image that figuratively captures Abel as a character. They should be able to justify their choices with direct links to the text.

Perspective on the text

Language opens a pathway towards opportunity.

In *Born a Crime,* it is clear that a knowledge of multiple languages enables opportunities that help Trevor and his mother to continue to move forward, and aspire to a life that would be otherwise inconceivable without that knowledge. Throughout the memoir, their abilities as multilingual shapeshifters mean they have the resources to communicate and construct circumstances that give space for love, empathy and connection; often with those who may otherwise present as a threat. Language provides them with the ability to connect with potential enemies and even expose the hypocrisy of apartheid. While language provides many opportunities, it is also apparent that South Africa's 'Tower of Babel' is fertile ground for misunderstanding and exploitation. Noah's rich and textured narration and dialogue is loaded with accented English, and the layers of various tribal dialects and tongues, inviting the understanding that language can be 'used to cross boundaries, handle situations, navigate the world' (p. 55).

Without a grasp of the English language , Trevor and his mother would never have been able to create a life beyond Soweto. The text outlines the apartheid regime's goal to keep black South Africans out of the economy and exclude those living in the townships from any potential prosperity, by limiting access to education in English. Patricia's childhood in the Transkei homelands, and her near-escape from the confines of the Bantu school system, set up to limit black South Africans to tribal languages and a smattering of Afrikaans in order to relegate them to a life of manual labour, meant that she lucked upon a 'white pastor who taught her in English' in one of the few mission schools that 'had contrived to stay open in spite of the Bantu government's policies' (p. 65). It is clear that Patricia's survival as an adult is underpinned by this stroke of luck. Although she lived in extreme poverty, 'when she literally ate dirt' (p. 65), she was empowered with language. Noah's assertion that 'she didn't have food or shoes or even a pair of underwear, but she had English' (p. 65) captures the essence of the richness and value that was placed upon a language education by his mother. She knew that despite all of the other hardships that were a part of her childhood, language provided a key to opportunity. Patricia understood one of apartheid's central tenets, 'to cripple the black mind' (p. 61), very well. This understanding, combined with the knowledge that in South Africa, 'English is the difference between getting a job or staying unemployed ... between getting off with a fine or going to prison' (p. 54), pushes Patricia to make the conscious decision to teach the young Trevor English as a first language. It is this motherly wisdom and aspiration, and the value she places on English, that pave the way for a life of success for both of them.

Noah's grasp of multiple languages, in addition to English, enables a trajectory for elevated social status when he is younger, but also empathy and connection as he enters adulthood. He learns very early that he can 'bridge the race gap' (p. 54) through language and this affords him the ability to avoid scrutiny as an outsider. It invites the awe and wonder of his peers as he is able to 'simulcast' (p. 55) in a variety of different languages. While he can't change the fact that his mixed-race status renders him a perennial outsider, language is a key that unlocks a connection that is not defined by his skin colour or homeland. The rarity of finding a white or coloured person who speaks multiple African languages means that his command of these 'immediately endeared [him] to the black kids' (p. 59). Likewise, as Trevor gets older, he finds that language opens up potential for connection through empathy and understanding. It does not only make him more popular or endearing, it helps him to see that his own judgements of others can be very misplaced. In 'The World Doesn't Love You', when Trevor finds himself sharing a jail cell with the Tsonga-speaking 'black version of the Incredible Hulk' (p. 236), a man who cannot understand the Zulu speaking police officer, Trevor becomes their conduit for communication. Noah reflects that 'once we started talking I realized that he wasn't the Hulk at all' (p. 237). His prejudiced assumptions about the man, based upon appearance alone, were immediately negated by the compassion and understanding that came with speaking his language. He listens to his story, and learns that he has landed in jail not because of a violent crime, but rather 'because the world has been taught to be scared of him' (p. 237). Noah's propensity for empathy, enabled by the gift of speaking Tsonga, offers clarity and the idea that 'the law isn't rational at all' (p. 239). Noah suggests that the fate of his 'hulk-like friend' is predetermined by his lack of an education and the limitations of only speaking his native language, Tsonga. Noah, on the other hand, communicates with the judge in English: the language 'equated with intelligence' (p. 54). His acquittal in this moment can be seen as a result of his ability to speak with the judge on the system's own terms, and the way that the right language equates to freedom.

While understanding multiple languages gets Trevor and his mother out of some impossibly dangerous situations, it also helps him to identify, examine and expose the hypocrisy of apartheid South Africa and those who label them as 'other'. The 'language of the oppressor' (p. 55) is weaponised by Patricia in order to 'handle situations'(p.55) but also as a method of holding that oppressor accountable for their bigotry. When Trevor and his mother encounter a racist shopkeeper speaking Afrikaans and instructing a guard to 'follow those blacks in case they steal something' (p. 55), Patricia's 'beautiful, fluent Afrikaans' (p. 55) catches the shopkeeper off-guard, and he apologises for assuming that they were 'like the other blacks' (p. 55). The fact that the shopkeeper does not acknowledge his own racism is not lost on Noah, but the hypocrisy underpinning that racism is defined by his perception that perfect Afrikaans somehow elevates their blackness above their non-Afrikaans speaking counterparts. Languages and perceptions of race and morality are inextricably linked in this moment. Noah's 'chameleon' status as polyglot means that while his 'colour didn't change, he could change your perception of [his] colour' (p. 56). In this way, language serves as a tool for shining a light on the assumptions tied to blackness. This develops Noah's understanding of his place in the world and empowers him with a sense of self that, encouraged by his mother, helps him to envisage a future where he is worthy of prosperity and success, despite his race. The idea that 'race is a construct' is reinforced through a multilingual lens.

While it is true that 'if you're black in South Africa, speaking English can give you a leg up' (p. 54), it is also evident that opportunities for learning languages were not afforded to all in South Africa, while Trevor Noah was growing up. Indeed, the eleven official languages of South Africa lead Noah to liken it to the 'Tower of Babel'; a system that was structurally designed to segregate even those who were similarly oppressed. What the racist apartheid regime underestimated, however, was the potential for the linguistic dexterity of people like Trevor and his mother Patricia, who were able to adapt to the language labyrinth of oppression, adopting multiple languages, and in doing so, empathising, belonging, and ultimately, surviving.

Close study

Passage 1

'I was the anomaly wherever we lived ... Then all of a sudden it's 'Planet of The Apes', and the monkeys have taken over.' (pp. 117-120)

In this passage, from Chapter 9 'The Mulberry Tree' in Part II of the text, Noah reflects upon his search for a sense of belonging that has, for his entire life, depended on where he lives and the colour of his skin. The dissonance between identifying as 'black' but being perceived as 'coloured' leads him to the feeling of being 'the anomaly' (p. 117) wherever he and his mother live. In this chapter, Noah at first remembers his time at Eden Park, a coloured area, and an incident where he runs home to his mother and stepfather after being bullied by neighbourhood kids for being a 'stupid bushman' (p. 122).

Prior to the bullying incident, Noah details the cultural conditions of being 'born a crime', living under apartheid, and learning that 'it is easier to be an insider as an outsider than an outsider as an insider' (p. 118). This statement invites the understanding that one can still be an outsider with a sense of belonging, but if a marginalised status has characteristics of privilege, i.e. whiteness, a sense of belonging will be evasive. Noah describes the preferred status of 'insider as an outsider', that is, being included as a member of a marginalised group, and the fact that it will always trump sharing some of the perceived privileges of whiteness, while identifying and experiencing the conditions of living with that marginalised group, that is 'outsider as an insider'. This passage explores the idea that to be too white as a black person in South Africa negates potential for inclusion in any community. Likewise, Noah characterises the tenuous foundations of white privilege under apartheid, arguing that 'those mixed bloodlines were always lurking, waiting to peek out, and fear of losing their status kept white people in line.' (p. 119). This chapter peels back the layers of a regime with rules and 'legal definitions' (p. 119) of race as arbitrary as they are subjective, and details the fact that people could be 'promoted to white' (p. 118) or even compelled to disown their own children, depending on the colour of their skin. The 'true purgatory' of 'yearning' experienced by those classified as coloured is also characterised in this chapter and Noah goes some way to explain the bullying behaviours of the coloured children, who were 'horribly racist' in Eden Park 'as a result' (p. 119) of their own trauma. The fact that the 'worst way to insult a coloured person was to infer that they were in some way black', calling out 'their primitiveness' (p. 120), was the result of many years of segregation and the indoctrinated belief that 'it was black people who were holding them back' (p. 120).

When Nelson Mandela's release from jail 'flip[ped] the country on its head', with the 'benchmark' suddenly becoming 'black' (p. 120), the hierarchical shift added to the sense of disconnection felt between coloured and black South Africans. When Noah writes that 'coloured people had it rough' (p. 120) living in 'limbo' (p. 121), he highlights the frustration and fear of a group of people who are consistently seen as 'almost there' (p. 118) – under apartheid, almost white and therefore an 'amperbaas: "almost-boss"' (p. 118); and post-apartheid, not quite 'in charge', along with those who are 'beautiful' and 'powerful' (p. 120).

Passage 2

'Sadly, no matter how fancy you made your house, there was one thing you could never aspire to improve: your toilet ... Mission accomplished.' (**pp. 42-44**)

In this passage, from Chapter 3 'Trevor, Pray' in Part I of the text, Noah recounts a very humorous story about being a five-year-old boy and needing to defecate but not wanting to use the outhouse. Arguably one of the most humorous moments in the memoir, this passage explores the mixture of old and new spirituality that fills the worlds of the women in his family when he is living in Soweto. This passage describes the act of toileting as an opportunity to feel profoundly human, as Noah speculates that 'God made humans shit in the way we do because it brings us back down to earth and gives us humility.' (p. 43). He describes feeling synonymously powerful and vulnerable and engaging in a 'moment of pure self-awareness' (p. 43).

He then places the idea of this 'really nice' moment in the context of the Soweto outhouse and describes the feeling of being 'robbed' of 'something magical' by 'the rain' and 'the flies' (p. 43). While the story here is absolutely hilarious – the idea of a five-year-old boy 'squatting and shitting on the kitchen floor' in order to learn what it feels like to 'relax and be with [him]self' (p. 43) – a closer reading reveals the lack of dignity inherent in living in the townships. He describes the way that poverty, and the 'corrugated-iron outhouse shared among the adjoining houses' (p. 43), stripped those in townships of a chance to be fully human. While it is true to say that 'we all shit the same' (p. 43), the conditions in which we toilet are entirely dependent on race and living conditions in South Africa. While very funny, this is one of those stories in the text that uses humour to unveil the horrors of inequality and the denial of basic sanitary conditions and human rights.

Passage 3

'My mom kept insisting that they take a statement and open a case, and they actually refused – they refused to write up a charge sheet ... She went all in. She gave up everything for him' (**pp. 256-258**)

Noah's mother wasn't just a victim of an abusive husband. She discovered, when seeking help from police after a beating from Abel, that 'they were men first and police second' (p. 257). Later on, Noah observes that whenever the police were called, 'it was like a boy's club' (p. 266). Much of this chapter foreshadows the injustices outlined in the Epilogue; with Abel escaping trial. This passage reinforces the patriarchal nature of the South African justice system and the way that black women continue to be subjected to a further layer of violence and abuse post-apartheid.

The notion that family violence is indeed a problem that should stay behind closed doors, that it is a 'family thing' (p. 256), underpins the attitudes of the police who refuse to take a statement from Patricia and insist that she doesn't 'want to involve the police' and that she should 'think it over' (p. 256). Her own mother, too, convinces Patricia that 'she should give Abel a second chance' and that 'all men do it' (p. 257). Noah notes that his 'own grandfather, Temperance, had hit her' (p. 257). This unjust acceptance, by family and police, of violence that is informed by racist and sexist assumptions about what it means to be a black woman in South Africa, is incredibly disturbing.

These events are perhaps made even more horrific as we know from very early in the text that Abel eventually shoots Patricia in the head. The structure of the text is important here: all of this unfolds in a way that enables the reader clear knowledge that Abel's actions should be taken as obvious red flags for what is to come. The way that Patricia goes 'all in ... [giving] up everything for him' (p. 258) speaks to her conviction and belief that she could shape their marriage into a 'true marriage of equals' (p. 258), despite it all. She 'truly believed in him' (p. 257) and 'as headstrong and independent as [his] mom is, she remains the woman who gives back' (p. 258).

Key quotes

'Black blood ran in the streets.' (p. 12)

The distinction between the dismantling of apartheid and the violence that followed needs to be made so that students understand that the end of apartheid did not exactly mean freedom for black South Africans. The idea of a 'Bloodless Revolution', of democracy triumphing over apartheid, neglects the horrific violence between the ANC and the IFP. Even after apartheid, the divisions between ethnic groups continued.

'A million things had to go right for us to slip through the cracks the way we did for as long as we did.' (p. 22)

The role of luck in the lives of Trevor and his mother, in combination with determination, tenacity and resilience, cannot be underestimated. As Noah asserts, often their fate was reliant on 'a roll of the dice' (p. 25). At times, everything seems so stacked against them that their survival is astonishing, with any number of variables impacting the difference between life and death. The bookending of the minibus incident and the shooting are both examples of this. Noah's encounters with police and authorities are also examples of some of the 'million things' that 'had to go right'. Noah's observation that in South Africa, 'The law isn't rational at all. It's a lottery.' (p. 238), reinforces this notion.

'Being chosen is the greatest gift you can give to another human being.' (p. 110)

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Trevor's confidence and self-worth, knowing that he was wanted by his mother and father, that their decision to conceive him was a conscious and defiant choice, enables him to move through the world knowing that even if he was 'born a crime', his parents were willing to take the risk and in doing so, they make the political personal. His gratitude for this 'choice' is evident even in his father's absence from his life once Abel partners with his mother. He insists that despite this period of absence, Robert was 'never not my father' (p. 110).

'I was bawling my eyes out and laughing hysterically at the same time.' (p. 282)

This is possibly a great summary of how the reader feels as they surf the waves of emotion that are captured by Noah's commentary. There are countless moments in the text when Trevor and Patricia are steeped in horror and yet somehow find the capacity to laugh. This is perhaps the memoir's greatest strength: although the stories are harrowing, there is a grounding humanity underpinning each anecdote. The reader is compelled to understand the power and role of laughter in survival.

'Comfort provides a floor but also a ceiling.' (p. 219)

It's possible that Noah would not have achieved the heights of his success as a comedian, TV show host and writer, had he led a more privileged life. The idea that comfort breeds complacency is an interesting one, especially in the context of this particular line of the text. The 'comfort' he describes is what he finds in the day-to-day hustle with his friend Sizwe, in Alexandra. He describes the 'gravitational pull' of 'the hood' and its comforts of the familiar. He knows that in this context he will never move beyond a life of 'many days we'd end up back at zero' (p. 217). His understanding that 'he had other options' (p. 224) enables him to leave the comfort of the hood.

Analytical text response topics

1. 'Humour offers psychological safety for Trevor Noah, and those around him, in *Born a Crime.*'

   Discuss.

2. 'The boundaries between love and violent discipline in *Born a Crime* are always blurred.'

   Discuss.

3. 'In *Born A Crime,* the cultural contradictions of living under a racist regime linger long after a democracy is declared.'

   To what extent do you agree?

4. "He only wants a woman who is free because his dream is to put her in a cage."

   How does *Born a Crime* explore the idea of patriarchy as central to life in South Africa?

5. 'Trevor Noah documents how the rules of apartheid result in dehumanisation for many in South Africa.'

   Discuss.

6. 'Race is a construct.'

   To what extent does Trevor Noah prove this to be true in *Born a Crime*?

7. 'Trevor Noah is very resourceful in *Born a Crime.'*

   In what ways is this apparent?

8. 'Trevor's outsider status both limits and enables his success in *Born a Crime.'*

   To what extent do you agree?

9. 'Noah suggests that we can only be fully empathetic to the experiences of others through a good education.'

   Discuss.

10. "That was my mom. Don't fight the system. Mock the system."

    How do Trevor and his mother mock the various systems of oppression in South Africa?

Creative text response tasks

1. Write the dialogue for an extra scene for 'Go Hitler!', after Trevor, Sizwe, Hitler and their crew leave the King David School. Offer split perspectives – a group of Jewish students trying to make sense of what just happened, and on the other hand, a conversation between Trevor and his friends. Present these conversations as group performances.
2. Imagine that Trevor has been asked to give a school tour. Write a short oration for a tour of H. A. Jack, Maryvale or Sandringham. Students should keep in mind how old he would have been at each of the schools when choosing which tour to write. Imagine he has been given the responsibility of showing a 'mixed' family though the school. These can be presented orally or in written form.
3. Write the letter that Noah sent his father Robert via the Swiss Embassy in his early twenties. Refer to Chapter 8, 'Robert', to help you gather ideas.
4. Using Chapter 14, write a 500 word inner monologue for Babiki as she sits in the car waiting outside the matriculation dance. What would she have wanted to say to Trevor if she could speak English? What did she think of him?
5. Imagine that Trevor makes mixtapes for his family members and friends as a Christmas gift. What songs would he put on each mixtape? Students might be allocated one character and should justify each selection and make direct connections with the text. These might be shared as group presentations or on a collaborative Google doc/Padlet.
   - Patricia
   - Abel
   - Frances
   - Koko
   - Temperance
   - Robert
   - Andrew
   - Maylene
   - Sizwe
6. Adopting Trevor's mother's voice, write a review of the memoir.

Appendix

Historical timeline

17th century – Dutch colony is established at the Cape of Good Hope.

Turn of the 19th century – The British take over the Cape of Good Hope.

1913 – Natives' Land Act is introduced, which made it illegal for black people to own land.

1927 – The Immorality Act is introduced, prohibiting sex (and indeed any relationships) between 'Europeans and Natives'.

1931 – South African Independence from the British is established.

1944 – Nelson Mandela joins the African National Congress (ANC).

1948 – The Afrikaaner-led National Party wins the election. Work begins on the system of laws known as apartheid.

1950s–1980s – The South African government is aggressive, violent and relentless in its imposition of apartheid rule. The international community becomes more and more outraged, with many sanctions placed against South Africa. The anti-apartheid movement, led by organisations like the African National Congress (ANC), campaigns for equality, advocating for non-violent action as well as armed resistance. The movement slowly gains momentum.

1962 – Nelson Mandela is jailed.

1984 – Trevor Noah is born.

1987 – Secret negotiations between the apartheid government and anti-apartheid leaders begin.

1990 – Nelson Mandela freed from jail after twenty-seven years. Trevor Noah is six years old. The National Party begins dismantling the apartheid system and legalising opposition parties.

1991 – Nelson Mandela becomes the president of the ANC

1994 – Apartheid ends, South Africa has a democratic election for the first time and Mandela wins the presidency. The ANC (at the time of writing this guide) has held power ever since.

1999 – Nelson Mandela retires after one term as president.

2002 – Noah's comedy/TV/entertainment career begins to take off in South Africa.

2009 – Abel shoots Noah's mother Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah.

2011 – Abel avoids a prison sentence; Noah moves to the United States.

2015 – Noah takes over as host of *The Daily Show* in America.

2016 – *Born a Crime* is published.

Post-apartheid South Africa – restoration and reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a body convened to judge human rights abuses committed during apartheid, was established in 1995. The commission was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and was focused on restorative rather than retributive justice in the wake of apartheid, offering amnesty to some who had openly admitted crimes against fundamental human rights

South Africa remains hampered by issues around income inequality, black unemployment and poverty; its white minority still owns the majority of land and wealth. Corruption between government and business interests have endured, despite the limited success of some of the ANC's social and economic empowerment policies and programs.

Glossary

- **Apartheid** – Translated from Afrikaans, meaning 'apartness', 'Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control.' (p. 19). It was constructed upon a foundation of international research, racial classification, segregation and ambiguity, fuelled by ideologies of white supremacy.

  The role of research: The South African government looked to the most racist countries around the world, 'setting up a formal commission to study institutionalized racism all over the world ... the government then used that knowledge to build the most advanced system of racial oppression known to man' (p. 19). For the context of Australian students, it is important to note that Noah makes a note of Australia as one of the countries that the South African government looked to for inspiration. Further reading and exploration of this context would be a way to embed the significance of marginalised Aboriginal experiences in light of the White Australia Policy and how this relates to South African apartheid. Resources for further reading can also be found in **References**.

  Racial classification: The population was divided into four groups: 'whites', Indians, 'coloureds', and 'blacks'. A discussion with students about the way this language will be used as a part of a study of South African history, compared to any other everyday context (where it would be inappropriate and offensive), is central to nurturing respectful relationships and ways of being beyond the classroom context.

  Overt ideology of white supremacy: The ideology of white supremacy means that apartheid guaranteed the white minority access to the majority of the nation's land, wealth, and political power.

  Segregation: Black South Africans were forced to live in black-only areas; cramped townships that were effectively slums and depleted rural areas described as homelands. Interracial marriage was prohibited.

  Ambiguity: Of course, as Trevor Noah's very existence proves (and as he argues repeatedly in *Born a Crime*), the racial classifications by those in power during the apartheid era were messy and changeable in practice, because race is a construct rather than a set of clear biological categories.

- **Afrikaans/Afrikaners** – Afrikaans is a West Germanic language spoken in South Africa by European settlers (and during settlement, their slaves). It is predominantly of Dutch origin with some influence from the Khoisan language. It is the first language of a majority of those considered 'coloured' in South Africa. The 1976 Soweto uprising occurred when the government introduced a policy whereby all education in black schools would be delivered in Afrikaans, rather than English. Afrikaners are Afrikaans-speaking white people.
- **Coloured** – Refers to the classification of peoples in South Africa considered multiracial, who may have ancestry from one or more of the various populations inhabiting the region, including African, Asian and European.
- **Cheese** – A slang term used to insult and label the hustlers in the township of Alexandra. To add cheese to food in Alexandra was seen as quite extravagant so if you were seen as from the 'right' side of the 'hood', you were 'cheese'. It suggested an inauthenticity about a person's 'gangster' status.
- **Amperbaas** – Afrikaans for 'almost-boss'; a racist insult used by white people to describe 'coloured' people during and post-apartheid.
- **Boesman** – Afrikaans for 'Bushman' and used as a racist insult against 'coloured' people especially, who were seen as 'too native' or 'too black.'
- **Colonists** – Refers to those who settle in and inhabit a colony.
- **Colonialism** – The policy or practice (or the belief in policies and practices) enabling the acquisition of full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically, often violently, using genocide as a tool of occupation.
- **Patriarchal** – Describing, relating to or denoting a system of society or government controlled by men.
- **Homelands** – Homelands, also known as Batustans, were created under apartheid as a method of maintaining segregation of black South African citizens. Between 1960 and 1994, three and a half million people were forcibly relocated to homelands. They were assigned to different homelands, according to their ethnicity. It was near impossible to make a living in the homelands, so many were forced to commute long distances to work as migrant labourers in South Africa's cities. It was also a way of imposing the separation of ethnic groups. For example, the KwaZulu was the Bantustan, or Homeland, for Zulus. Transkei was created for Xhosa peoples (Patricia's family). The Homelands were officially dismantled in 1994.

- **Townships** – Refers to racially segregated, underdeveloped, urban areas built on the outskirts of cities. Soweto and Alexandra are examples of townships.
- **Tower of Babel** – An origin myth from the Bible that is meant to explain the existence of multiple languages. Noah looks at the story, which suggests the idea that God created multiple languages in order to confuse humans and make it difficult for everyone to understand each other.
- **Gomorrah** – Along with Sodom, Gomorrah was a city from the Bible that was destroyed by God for its wickedness. Noah references the fact that the Alexandra township was nicknamed Gomorrah.
- **Bantu Schools** – These were set up after 1953 with the purpose of readying black South African children for manual labour and menial work. Attendance was compulsory. All missionary schools (apart from three) were forced to close down after the government stopped funding them. The idea was to maintain the dynamic that meant black South Africans could only ever be servants to, or labourers for, white South Africans.
- **Nelson Mandela** – Black South African anti-apartheid activist and first president of South Africa's democracy from 1994-1999. His government focused on dismantling the legacy of apartheid. Joining the ANC in 1944, Mandela acted as President from 1991-1997. A Xhosa man (the same origin as Noah's mother), he served twenty-seven years in prison from 1962 for conspiring to overthrow the State. He was released in 1990.
- **ANC** (African National Congress) – The ANC was founded in 1912, and formally outlawed under apartheid but ran in secret between 1960-1990. Since the end of apartheid, it has been the governing political party in South Africa. It has broad support from black South Africans and the Xhosa (Noah's mother's) population.
- **IFP** (Inkatha Freedom Party) – The political party that was up against the ANC even though both parties opposed apartheid. The IFP was founded in 1975 with a largely Zulu following. Has had little/no influence since the beginning of democracy. 'Inkatha' is Zulu for the grass coil used by women to carry loads on their heads and was used by the party to signify its 'strength and cohesion'.

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STORIES

Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood

by Trevor Noah

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1/134-136 Cambridge Street
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T 9411 8500 F 9411 8511
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