

***Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* by Trevor Noah**  
**A Reading Guide**

**Synopsis**

*Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* is a compelling autobiography by Trevor Noah that recounts his unique experiences growing up in South Africa during the final years of apartheid and the early years of freedom that followed. The title refers to his very existence as a mixed-race child, which was illegal under apartheid laws designed to keep different races separate. Trevor's mother, Patricia, is a black Xhosa woman, and his father, Robert, is a white Swiss man. Their illegal relationship and Trevor's birth during such a turbulent time for South Africa form the backbone of the book, revealing the complexities and absurdities of institutionalized racism.

Throughout the memoir, Trevor navigates various challenges and adventures that illuminate both the oppressive societal structures and the vibrant culture of South Africa. He delves into stories of his childhood and teenage years, ranging from hilariously sneaking into prom to enduring difficulties like his stepfather's violent behavior. Each story is layered with Trevor's sharp wit and keen observations, drawing readers into a world where he often felt like an outsider. His relationship with his fearless, devoutly Christian mother is central to the narrative, highlighting how her teachings and tough love were crucial in shaping his character and resilience.

*Born a Crime* not only offers a window into Trevor Noah's formative years but also provides insightful commentary on the broader social and political issues of South Africa. The book is an educational and entertaining read for ninth graders, offering lessons on history, society, and personal growth. Through Noah's eyes, young readers can learn about the impact of apartheid, the power of language in overcoming barriers, and the importance of finding one's identity in a world that constantly tries to define us. This memoir is an inspiring tale of overcoming adversity through humor, grit, and the unyielding bond between a mother and her son.

**Questions to Help Your with Reading Comprehension**

1. The novel's title is surprisingly literal. Why was Trevor Noah's birth an actual crime in South Africa in 1984?
2. What was apartheid?
3. Identify the following groups from early chapters: Afrikaners, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, and "mixed-race." How do they feel about each other and why?
4. How many languages did Trevor Noah learn to speak as a child? Why? How did this affect his childhood?
5. What kinds of instances of bullying did Trevor Noah witness as a young child? What was his reaction?
6. What is the nature of the bootleg "business" Trevor starts? Why does he do so and to what effect?
7. Who is "Sizwe"? How did his friendship affect Trevor Noah growing up?
8. What sorts of interactions did Trevor and his mother have with the South African police? Why were they arrested? What was the outcome?

9. How do Trevor's father, Robert, his grandfather, Temperance, and his stepfather, Abel, compare to each other? How does each one treat Trevor's mother Patricia and what effect does this treatment have on Trevor as a child?
10. Who are Andrew and Issac? What does Patricia do to protect them? What is the outcome of this action?

### **Broader Questions to Consider as Your Read**

1. What does the title *Born a Crime* signify in the context of Trevor Noah's life and the laws of apartheid? What role did Noah's mixed-race identity play in his experiences both during and after apartheid? How did it affect his sense of belonging?
2. Describe Trevor Noah's relationship with his mother, Patricia. How did she influence his personality and his life choices?
3. Analyze the figure of Abel, Trevor's stepfather. What was his relationship with Trevor and Patricia, and how did this relationship evolve over time?
4. Explain the significance of language in Noah's life. How did it help him navigate the complexities of South African society? In what ways did language present significant challenges for Noah growing up?
5. Not surprisingly, being a comedian, Noah often uses humor in his narrative. Provide examples of how he uses humor to deal with serious and often dangerous situations. How effective is this approach? What are some of the other coping strategies that Trevor Noah and his family used to deal with the oppression and challenges imposed by apartheid?
6. Noah discusses several instances of learning from mistakes in his youth. Can you identify one or two of these instances and describe what he learned?
7. Noah talks about various survival tactics his mother employed to keep them safe and fed. Can you list some specific strategies she used and discuss their effectiveness?
8. What role does religion play in Trevor Noah's life and upbringing? How does his mother's religious beliefs affect him personally and spiritually?
9. Noah often finds creative ways to make money and navigate economic hardship. Describe one of these ventures and discuss what it reveals about his resourcefulness and understanding of his environment.
10. The structure of *Born a Crime* is unique given that it is not a linear narrative but rather a collection of personal essays, each chapter functioning as a standalone story that also contributes to the overarching narrative of Trevor Noah's life. Why do you think Noah organized the book this way? Do you think this structure was effective in presenting the story of Noah's upbringing?

### **Questions to Consider Upon Reflection Once You Complete the Novel**

1. **Lessons from Hardships:** Trevor's mother taught him many valuable lessons through both her words and actions. What is one lesson from the book that you find particularly inspiring or useful? How could you apply this lesson in your own life? You might reflect on a specific challenge that Trevor faced in the book. How did he deal with this challenge, and what can you learn from his approach to overcoming obstacles in your own life?

2. **Identity and Belonging:** Trevor often discusses how he navigated various social groups without fully belonging to any of them. Reflect on your own life: Have there been times when you felt like you didn't completely fit in? How did you handle those situations?
3. **The Role of Family:** Family plays a crucial role in Trevor Noah's upbringing, particularly his relationship with his mother. How does this relationship influence his view of the world? How has your family influenced your views and shaped your character? In what ways can family sometimes present a challenge?
4. **Cultural Awareness:** How did reading *Born a Crime* change or deepen your understanding of life under apartheid in South Africa? Were there any aspects of Trevor's experiences that surprised or shocked you?
5. **Understanding Different Perspectives:** Reading about Trevor Noah's experiences offers a window into a world that may be quite different from your own. Trevor's stories often highlight issues of racism, inequality, and injustice. How has this book helped you understand perspectives or experiences different from yours? Why is this understanding important in our global society?