

Literary Analysis of *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah

In Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, readers are introduced to the comedian's childhood and overall life in South Africa. This is done through a series of different chapters, each focusing on a different part of his past. However, in many chapters, Noah brings up a common theme: His race. As a mixed kid in South Africa growing up during Apartheid (and its aftermath), Noah had many issues regarding space; namely so where he belongs, where he is allowed, and where he cannot go. These issues raise the question: What role does Trevor Noah's race play in terms of physical space?

As Noah moves through different schools and systems - both diverse and not - the rising issue of his mixed background becomes more and more apparent. As a younger child at Maryvale, Noah recalls on page 56, "In my class we had all kinds of kids. Black kids, white kids, Indian kids, colored kids... because of scholarships, we all sat at the same table... There was no racial separation. Every clique was racially mixed." Then later on the same page, he explains, "I don't remember anybody being teased about their race... It was a wonderful experience to have, but the downside was that it sheltered me from reality." With Noah being younger and at a more diverse school, his race doesn't clearly play into much. He does not have the notion instilled in him that since he is different from the other kids, he will face discrimination - all Noah knows at Maryvale is that all colors of kids can play, work, eat, and learn together. Once he moves to a larger and more segregated school, the idea that his race plays into his everyday life becomes a fact. During recess, Noah is faced with the conundrum that he is neither black, nor white, nor Indian. He is immediately

stuck in the middle ground, with no idea where to go. There are groups of white kids, groups of black kids, but Noah doesn't seem to fit into either group – until he speaks with a group of the black kids. “How come you speak our languages?” They asked. ‘Because I’m black,’ I said, ‘Like you.’ ‘You’re not black.’ ‘Yes, I am.’ ‘No, you’re not. Have you seen yourself?’” This conversation on page 58 sparks a bit of thinking from both sides, and Noah subconsciously makes a choice in that moment. He chooses black. Noah’s race allows him to hang out and be accepted as a black kid, though he is only partially black. Noah does not feel the same toward the white kids, as this is demonstrated by Noah urging the counselor to let him switch to the B classes. He says, “That same afternoon, I went back to the A classes, and by the end of the day I realized they weren’t for me. Suddenly, I knew who my people were, and I wanted to be with them.”

Noah’s choice does not stay static. It changes depending on what is the safest for him in that moment, attesting to his chameleon status. Chameleons do not always blend in, though, and that reflects on Noah as well – specifically in the chapter *The Mulberry Tree*. He mentions that though Eden Park was full of colored kids, they were all extremely different from him. The children who should understand and connect with Noah the most are the kids that he sticks out to. On page 117, Noah says, “The animosity I felt from colored people I encountered growing up was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to deal with.” He is disliked for keeping his ties to black culture, while also being shamed for accepting his whiteness. The people who should relate to his struggle are, in fact, the people being the meanest to him. Many kids his age resorted to bullying him, and at some points robbing him, all while Noah was waiting with his head in the clouds. As one of the more

pacifistic and innocent children in Eden Park, he becomes a target. By far the most notable incident is the one that took place at the mulberry tree. Noah begins taking fruit from the tree, minding his own business around the older colored teens, when they knock berries out of his hands and then quickly escalate to tossing berries and insults at him. This is one of the first incidents to make him run home crying – for once, he is shown that he is not wanted somewhere. For most of his life until that specific point, he had survived by flip-flopping groups and fitting in almost perfectly. Noah’s chameleon disguise didn’t work with these teenagers, and he is not used to this feeling of complete rejection.

Once Noah hits Sandringham, his race and background comes into play even more than before. Sandringham isn’t simply black or white, it’s thousands of other kids from all walks of life who are all trying to fit in with each other. Of course, everyone has a clique or a main group that they belong to – but Noah does not. “Ever the outsider, I created my own strange little world. I did it out of necessity. I needed a way to fit in.” He explains on page 139. This leads to his explanation into how exactly he got an ‘in’ with many groups within the school; by being the tuck-shop guy. By doing favors for others and limiting the time he needed to actually spend with them, he could say that he technically *did* fit in with most of the groups, despite his skin color or race. At Sandringham, he learned to better utilize his chameleon disguise in order to fit into more spaces, instead of just one or the other.

However, this doesn’t mean that Noah was less of an outcast, or that he made lots of friends. He addresses this on page 141, stating, “I wasn’t popular, but I wasn’t an outcast. I was everywhere with everybody, and at the same time I was all by myself.”

Trevor Noah's race serves multiple purposes in terms of space, but it is the most helpful socially. When he is given the option, Noah is able to drift effortlessly between groups that are nothing like each other. As Noah utilizes his disguise more, he is able to recognize the different privileges that he holds over others. Through these different learning curves and opportunities, readers can discern that Noah's race plays a large role in gaining acceptance but holds that same power in discrimination and denial.