Born a Crime Study Guide

Born a Crime by Trevor Noah

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Noah, Trevor. Born a Crime. Penguin / Random House / Doubleday, 2016.

The book, subtitled “Stories from a South African Childhood,” is a collection of the author’s recollections of his childhood and youth growing up in apartheid-era South Africa. Each chapter is prefaced with commentary (presented in bold font) that in most cases offers cultural or historical background (that is: commentary on the history and causes of apartheid in South Africa), but in some cases gives family or personal background to the chapter that follows.

The first part of the book focuses on the author’s childhood. He describes his complicated relationship with his tough-loving mother, who escaped her own poverty-ridden childhood because of her determination to live life on her own - often rule-breaking - terms, an attitude that she seems to have passed on to her son. The author also describes her powerful and unshakeable faith in God and Jesus, a faith that her son consistently challenged. As his relationship with his mother developed, the author writes, so did his experiences of being mixed-race: his mother was black, his father was white, and he (the author) was born at a time when two people from different races could be charged with a crime if they were caught having an intimate relationship. This, he says, was why he was kept indoors for much of his childhood: he could have been taken away from his mother and either or both of his parents (but most likely his mother) could have been imprisoned.

The second part of the book focuses on the author’s experiences when he was an adolescent. At the same time as he was discovering the complications of having relationships with, or at least attractions to, young women, he was also discovering more about the depths and dangers of being mixed race. He writes of a particular experience in which he and a black friend were witnessed committing an act of petty theft, a situation in which the friend suffered serious consequences that the author ultimately escaped because of the relative paleness of his complexion.

The third part of the book focuses on the author’s late teen years and young adulthood. He writes of discovering ways of making both money and friends, ways that transcended both his racial situation and the fact that, as he describes it, he was both poor and unattractive. He also writes of ways in which his hustling to make money got him into trouble, writing of one situation in particular that resulted in his spending time in jail, only to be bailed out by his mother.

In the final chapter of the book’s third part, the author writes in detail about his relationship with his mother’s husband Abel (she never married the author’s father), a traditionally-minded but talented car mechanic with a violent temper. The author describes the chain of circumstances that led first to his mother being physically assaulted, and then to him being likewise assaulted; the subsequent chain of events that led to his mother staying in the relationship and the author moving out; and finally,

the chain of events that led to his mother being shot by Abel. The author writes of his mother surviving the shooting, of Abel escaping criminal punishment, and his mother's ultimate belief that her life was saved because of her faith in Jesus.

Part 1, Section 1

Summary

The book opens with a reproduction of South Africa's "Immorality Act, 1927" – "To prohibit illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and natives and other acts in relation thereto" (n/a).

Preface to "Run" – The author describes how the apartheid system of government was designed to pit the many tribes of indigenous South Africans against each other, particularly the Zulus (a tribe that the author describes as "warriors") and the Xhosa (described as "thinkers"), the tribe to which his mother belonged.

Run – As he sets up the circumstances of his being thrown out of a moving car by his mother, the author says it happened on the way to church, and describes the three different churches he went to while a child in South Africa (white church, mixed church, and black church). He also describes how his (very religious) mother drove a second hand car, adding that he blames most of the bad things in his life on used cars. The author writes of how forceful a person his mother was, and how she always used to run after him when she caught him doing something wrong.

After a brief reference to the history of tribal warfare in South Africa even after apartheid ended, the author describes how that warfare carried on even when he and his mother were given a ride in one of the privately owned and run minibuses that provided transportation for non-whites. He describes the violence of the Zulu driver, and the driver's verbal attacks on his Xhosa mother, including a reference to her having a mixed-race child (the author). Finally, the author says, he and his mother threw themselves out of the moving vehicle and, after his mother shouted "Run!" they ran for their lives. Increasingly tense conversation about whether God meant for the incident to happen was finally broken when the author made his mother laugh.

Preface to "Born a Crime" – The author describes the historical origins of apartheid, including the deep research that went into its development, simultaneously likening and contrasting it to the experiences of slavery in America.

Born a Crime – As he references the mixed-race relationship of his black mother and white father, the author describes the history of the brutal laws against mix-race relationships in South Africa, saying that he and his family were lucky they stayed free and untouched for as long as they did. He describes his mother's determined independence to function around the apartheid rules, and how she convinced the quiet white man down the hall to father a child with her. That child, the author, was "born a crime" (26).

As he writes about his childhood, the author describes several instances in which his existence as a mixed child had to be kept secret, including the occasions when he

visited his black grandmother in Soweto and was not allowed to play with his black cousins. As an adult, he writes, he discovered that other mixed-race children were taken by their parents into parts of the world where they were not in danger. When he asked his mother why she never left, he says that she told him she did not want to leave her home.

Analysis

The first thing that the reader sees is a literal, legal reference to the truth of the book's title: the fact that the author truly was "born a crime," a situation developed further in these first two chapters.

In these chapters, the author clearly sketches in several of the circumstances in which his parents' crime took place – in particular, the motivations for, and consequences of, apartheid. What is particularly effective about the author's work, here and throughout the book, is that he explores those consequences on the macrocosmic level (big picture, national) and the microcosmic level (smaller picture, personal and intimate). In other words, the life of the country was reflected in the lives (the author, his mother, the rest of his family) being told about.

Aside from the book's exploration of its central macrocosmic theme (i.e. the history and consequences of apartheid), these first two chapters also introduce several of its central microcosmic themes. These include the presence and power of religious faith (explored through the portrayal of the deep faith held by the author's mother and the author's constant challenging of that faith) and the influence and nature of a mother's love. This section's references to all these themes, and events / experiences associated with them, also serve as foreshadowings of further developments of these themes throughout the narrative.

There are also a few notable instances of particular incidents foreshadowing similar incidents later in his story. These include the author's reference to his dislike for used cars and the story of his mother's relationship with his father, both of which foreshadow significant events later in the author's life recounted in significant detail later in the book.

Vocabulary

prohibit, illicit, carnal, intercourse, thereto, apartheid, futility, nimble, resistant, indigenous, colonizer, jubilant, catharsis, karaoke, exposure, accrue, tangerine, obstinacy, notorious, harangue, promiscuous, viable, subjugate, expendable, robust, surveillance, compendium, incoherent, prohibition, segregate, ramification, quell, atrocity, multinational pharmaceutical, expatriate, cosmopolitan, clientele, exhilarate, prodigal

Part 1, Section 2

Summary

Preface to “Trevor, Pray” – The author describes how traditional spiritual practices (like witchcraft) are still practiced in South Africa, alongside various forms of Christianity.

Trevor, Pray – The author describes growing up in a family of women (including his mother, grandmother, blind great-grandmother, and aunts), saying he was generally unable to see his white father. He goes on to say that growing up in such a family was common, because the male parents of non-mixed black children were all working in the mines. He adds that the absence of men was filled by intense religious faith and practice, describing regular Tuesday night prayer meetings at his grandmother’s house. There, he says, he was asked to pray, because he prayed in English and, as he says, everybody knew English prayers got answered first.

After a description of how none of the ramshackle homes in Soweto (the township where he lived) included running water or a toilet, the author tells a story of how, one rainy day, he had to go to the bathroom but did not want to go outside to the outhouse, and so “shit” (44) on a piece of paper in the house, forgetting that his blind grandmother could hear and smell everything that was happening. He managed to finish his “business” (44) and conceal the evidence, but when first his grandmother and then his mother got home, his worried great-grandmother said there was a demon in the house. A search discovered what the author had done, the author watching as first the family and then the neighborhood gathered to have a prayer meeting and cast out the demon. He describes being called to pray; offering a feeble prayer in the hopes that God would not strike him down; and then feeling terrible that night, hoping that God “had more important things to deal with than [his] shit” (47).

Preface to “Chameleon” – The author makes the claim that language is a key to both defining discrimination (i.e. separating people, and reinforcing their differences by their languages) and transcending it (i.e. if someone looks different but sounds the same, it becomes easier to accept the commonality).

Chameleon – This chapter begins with the author’s description of how he was treated differently by his family, and his community, because his skin was so much paler than that of everyone else around him: only his mother, he says, had no problem treating him as though he did not look white. He then describes how he avoided getting into trouble by learning the variety of languages being used around him: English (the language of status); Xhosa (the language of his family); and Zulu, Afrikaans, or any of the other tribal languages. He adds that all his experiences with different languages made him “realize that language, even more than color, defines who you are to people” (56). He describes becoming “a chameleon. My color didn’t change, but I could change your perception of my color” (56).

With that, the author moves into a description of his post-apartheid school days which, he says, made him realize that he felt more black (i.e. like his family) than white (i.e. like those he looked like). He describes how shocking it was to go to a segregated school (up to then, he had only lived in non-segregated, black communities) and how, even though he was in a primarily white class, he made friends with the black kids because of his ability with languages. He describes realizing that he wanted to be with the black kids, in spite of being told that it would hold him back: “I decided,” he says, “that I’d rather be held back with people I liked than move ahead with people I didn’t know” (59).

Analysis

The primary thematic development of this section of the book relates to its exploration of different ways in which religious faith manifested in, and affected, the author’s life. In that context, the story of his deficating in the house, while certainly comic in overall tone, also illustrates how seriously the women in his family took their faith, and how complex that faith actually was (i.e. in its combination of what many would call superstition and what perhaps that same “many” could call solid, traditional Christianity).

Meanwhile, the two chapters in this section are linked by their exploration of the issue of language. Specifically, the use of English as referred to in “Pray, Trevor” (essentially seen as the language of God) relates to the use of other languages as referred to in “Chameleon,” in that all the uses referred to evoke experiences of safety, connection, and trust.

The world “chameleon” refers both to a particular amphibian and a unique characteristic of that amphibian: the defensive ability to change the color of its skin to match its background and, as a result, hide from potential predators. The author likens his ability to change the language he was using to that ability, and indicates that both attempts at camouflage resulted in the same consequences: escaping violence. Here it is important to note that while both the author and the chameleon achieve a degree of safety and freedom as a result of their ability to change how they were / are perceived by matching their surroundings, the author gained an additional benefit: for at least a short time he fit in, and felt like he belonged. This aspect of his story and personality appears on other occasions in the narrative, and can be seen as a manifestation of the book’s thematic interest in the search for independence and individual identity.

Vocabulary

ancestral, pejorative, docket, forensic, temperance, boisterous, pugilistic, masquerade, patriarch, recourse, matriarch, aspiration, kiosk, allocate, corrugated, commotion, chameleon, simulcast, preconception, perforate, lenient, pandemonium, clique, aptitude, anomaly

Part 1, Section 3

Summary

Preface to “The Second Girl” – The author describes how, under apartheid, the education was designed to keep children under-educated, and how the system was representative of both colonialism and / or racism.

The Second Girl – The first part of this chapter is a biography of the author’s mother, Patricia. He describes her driven personality; her being sent to live with an aunt in deep, hard-farming poverty; and her determination to leave that life behind, which she did. He also describes her determination to not be beaten down by her suffering, saying that the past is there to be learned from; and how she worked hard to give him a better life, including making sure he learned to read and think. He remembers her saying “My job is to feed your body, feed your spirit, and feed your mind” (71) which, he says, she did by, among other things, taking him to explore white neighborhoods and other white activities. He describes people thinking that his mom was crazy, but her then telling them that “even if he never leaves the ghetto, he will know that the ghetto is not the world” (74).

Preface to “Loopholes” – The author discusses the different, arbitrary ways that race was handled in apartheid South Africa, referring to how views of race were defined, in part, by economics.

Loopholes – The author describes his hyperactive childhood, portraying himself as having a lot of energy and a lot of appetites – for food, for books, for excitement. He writes that he was almost always in conflict with his mother, who was at times affectionate, at times exasperated, and at times very good at beating him at his own taunting game. The author then writes that throughout everything, even beatings, that he knew his mother loved him, adding that he was frequently given psychological testing at school because of his high energy levels, and was just as frequently found not only healthy, but likely to be a lawyer or a criminal: both professions, he said, required the ability to find loopholes which, he adds, he was very good at. He describes how his mother was always on his side even when he, by accident, caused a fire that burned down the home of a white family for whom his mother’s boyfriend Abel worked.

The author then says that he was “blessed with another trait [he] inherited from [his] mother: her ability to forget the pain in life” (90). He describes having the memory of events that caused the pain, but not of the pain itself: it is too important, he says, to keep “pushing boundaries and breaking the rules …”. There comes a point, he says, when “it’s time to get up to some shit again” (91)

Analysis

In cultural studies, the term “colonialism” refers to a situation in which a powerful established culture explored, conquered, and/or destroyed an indigenous culture (i.e. already present), perceived by the colonizing culture as more primitive. In the case of South Africa, for example, the country and its black indigenous inhabitants experienced colonialism at the hands of the Dutch; in India, the country and its indigenous inhabitants experienced colonialism at the hands of the British; in America, the country and its Native American inhabitants likewise experienced colonialism at the hands of the British. It is essential to note that in many cases, colonialism was practiced by white, western, relatively wealthy cultures intent on exploiting so-called primitive cultures for resources, human and natural alike. Apartheid, then, like slavery, can be seen as institutionalized, legalized colonialism, shaped and defined to ensure that the so-called “dominant” culture remained so.

To move to more narrative-specific considerations: in “The Second Girl,” the author creates a vivid word portrait of his mother, the most significant development of the book’s thematic emphasis on the power and significance of a mother’s love. What is particularly clear as a result of the writing and content of this chapter is that the author’s mother was desperate and determined that her son have a different life from that which she was forced to live: not only did she create circumstances in which that might happen, she also provided an inspiring example of how to do it. Meanwhile, references to the power and influence of her love in this chapter are clear foreshadowings of other examples of her determination later in the narrative.

In “Loopholes,” the author continues his explorations of the similarities between and his mother, focusing on their shared ability to learn from the pain of the past rather than dwelling on it, and/or becoming self-pitying. There is, however, significant irony in the comment here, in that later in the narrative, the author describes some significantly negative experiences of his mother’s ongoing relationship with Abel which, the author suggests, she never learned from and continued repeating. The reference to Abel here foreshadows later references to those experiences.

Vocabulary

enthusiast, coincidence, curriculum, dilapidated, forcible, defiant, gallivant, deplete, menial, subsistence, deprivation, pristine, concession, furtive, adjacent, varietal, snippet, embark, frugality, voracious, hyperactive, prankster, arsenal, relentless, devious, accusatory, missive, disruptive, invariable, infraction, guerilla, sociopath, ultimatum, bursary, authoritarian, turpentine

Part 1, Section 4

Summary

Preface to “Fufi” – The author describes the apparently world-wide belief that black people do not like cats, citing their association with the supernatural. “In South Africa,” he adds, “black people have dogs” (93).

Fufi – After briefly describing his family’s first failed attempt at having pets (a pair of black cats), the author describes his close, loving relationship with the athletic but strangely stupid dog Fufi: it was only later, at her death, that it was learned she was deaf. The author also describes Fufi being mysteriously absent during the day; his discovery that she was being cared for by another boy during her absences; and the author's mother’s having to resort to bribery to get her back. He then writes about realizing, as a result of his relationship with Fufi, that no matter how much one loves another, the other is not the one’s property, a lesson he says he has carried into all his relationships.

Preface to “Robert” – In a preface composed almost entirely of dialogue, the author describes his mother’s determination that he get to know his father. “You need to show him what you’ve become,” she said. “You need to finish that story” (101).

Robert – As he tells the story of his relationship with his father, the author reveals that he never called his father “dad” or anything of the like: it was too dangerous. He describes his father’s private, fastidious nature; his hatred of anything racist; and his independence. The author describes his father's regular routine of visits (on Sundays, birthdays, and Christmas), eventually revealing that even though they spent a relatively good amount of time together, he never really got to know his father.

The author then writes about how supportive his mother always was of his relationship with his father, reminding him that the only reason he had a relationship with him at all was because, after he was born, his father insisted that that relationship exist. This, and his mother’s own insistence that he find his father, led to the author’s eventual (as an adult) search for his father. At first, he writes, the search was hampered by his father’s insistence on privacy, but eventually rewarded with a reunion (during the description of his search, the author refers to his mother’s marriage to the abusive, alcoholic Abel). The author describes his constant wondering, in the years since his father’s departure whether his father actually cared. He was therefore, he writes, surprised and moved to find that, when they eventually had their reunion, his father had closely followed his son’s career. This, the author writes, then led him to a greater determination to get to know his father, and to spending a weekend with him, which resulted in the author knowing absolutely nothing more. After their time together, the author writes, his father asked what he had learned. Only that his dad was “extremely secretive,” the author writes. “You see?” his father said. “You’re getting to know me already” (111).

Analysis

The emphasis in these two chapters is on a pair of relationships that the author suggests took him outside the dominant relationship of his early life (i.e. his relationship with his mother) and exposed him to other ways of interacting with other important influences in his life. There is a clear sense here that while his mother taught him a great deal about how to think and how to be, both in terms of himself and the world, his relationships with Fufi and his father taught him a great deal about how to feel, and specifically how to feel affection, respect, and contentment within boundaries.

The writing in this section describes these parallel lessons within a pair of thematic contexts: in a more overt sense, the context of the book's portrayal of various strivings for independence and identity; and, in a more subtly developed sense, the book's exploration of how life can be lived within the constant presence, or threat of violence. This last is most vividly evoked in the passing reference to the dangers associated with the author calling his father "dad": it is essential to remember that for father, mother, and child, being associated in a mixed-race family was still a crime. As the author himself notes, it was something of a miracle that the family was never caught.

One last family / relationship related point has to do with the passing reference to Abel, a reference that provides a vivid contrast to the affectionate portrait the author creates of his biological father and, at the same time, foreshadows later revelations of just how violent Abel eventually became.

Vocabulary

finite, impregnate, gruesome, malicious, impulsive, homogeneity, exploit, animosity, arbitrary, vibrant, lavish, frugal, contentious, discretion, pester

Part 2, Section 1

Summary

Preface to “The Mulberry Tree” – The author describes the origins of the “colored” people of South Africa, descended from the children of white colonizers who impregnated the women of the indigenous tribes at the time, the Khoisan. Over time, he writes, the pure Khoisan were eliminated, leaving behind a population of mixed raced peoples which absorbed other mixed-race individuals to create a community of people that, in the author’s words, do not know who they are.

The Mulberry Tree – This chapter begins with an explanation of how colored people in South Africa were treated like outsiders, and how anyone perceived as being better than the others in their community (or trying to be), whatever the community, was bullied and reviled. The author describes himself as being in that situation: being colored, living in a colored community, but perceived as being an outsider because of his circumstances (i.e. child of a white father, able to speak several languages). He describes being continually bullied, referring to a specific incident under the mulberry tree near his house. He relates how he went home and told Abel, then his mother’s boyfriend, what happened, saying that he knew that Abel had a capacity for violence that he wanted to tap into (narration includes references to Abel, at some point in the future, hitting both the author and his mother, and buying a gun). Abel, the author says, found the person who led the bullying and savagely beat him, the author realizing that Abel was not just getting revenge: he was unleashing his own capacity for violence and anger.

Preface to Chapter 10 – The author describes how, even when he was a child, his mother was instructing him on how to be a good man to the woman in his life.

“A Young Man’s Long, Awkward, Occasionally Tragic, and Frequently Humiliating Education in Affairs of the Heart, Part 1: Valentine’s Day” – The author describes how, on the first Valentine’s Day in his new school, he was pushed into asking the only other colored / mixed person, Maylene, into being his Valentine. He describes his nervousness about asking her, his excitement when she said yes and kissed him, and his disappointment when, on the big day, she told him she had started seeing another boy. That boy, the author says, was white: everything he was not.

Preface to “Outsider” – The author writes about the various ways his mother had of saving gas in their unreliable car, including having him push when there was no money to pay for any. He describes the humiliation of that experience in terms that make it seem almost like the worst of all the humiliations he suffered.

Outsider – At his next school, the author writes, he was still very much an outsider, unable to fit in with any of the groups or cliques that were mostly defined by race. He then describes how he managed to find a niche, a way to fit in. Because he was so fast, he could get to the school shop, where everyone bought their food, before everyone

else: so, he started taking orders and money to buy food for people, in exchange for a small commission. That, and making people laugh, he adds, helped him feel like he belonged at least a little.

Analysis

On one level, the action and narratives of the events and situations described in Part 2, Section 1 can be seen as a darker side, or a mirror image, of the book's general thematic interest in the idea of fighting for independence and identity. The author's situation can be perceived as his being forced to develop a positive sense of self and individuality as a result of so many efforts to make him feel negative – an outsider worming his way towards the inside. All this, in turn, can be seen as relating to the book's over-arching, primary theme exploring the history and the consequences of apartheid: here again, and as earlier discussed, the author explores the micro-cosmic (personal) aspects of living within a socio-political system that institutionalized racism on a macro-cosmic (cultural) level.

It is essential to note, however, that in the author's telling of the Maylene story, there is no reference to her explaining why she chose the other boy. The author's contention that it was because the other boy was white comes across as an assumption – a likely scenario, but still an assumption.

The other main point to note about this section is the inclusion of another reference to Abel's capacity for violence. There is a sense here, as elsewhere in the book where these references occur, that the narrative is building towards some kind of major revelation about the place and existence of violence in the relationship between the author, his mother, and the man with whom she was involved.

One final point to note about this section is the passing reference, in the preface to "Outsider," to the author's dislike of his mother's second-hand car. This can be seen as a reiteration of his earlier comment that much of what he disliked about his childhood and youth can / could be traced back to some kind of association with a used car. At the same time, references here and earlier to used cars can be seen as foreshadowing the most significant, and significantly difficult, encounter the author had with a second-hand car, an encounter described in detail in Part 3, Section 1.

Vocabulary

bushmen, nomadic, lineage, affinity, ostracism, assimilate, disavow, pelt (v.), perception, gradient, microcosm, predicament, constituent

Part 2, Section 2

Summary

Preface to Chapter 12 – In a rare preface not related to apartheid, the author writes of having no regrets for things he has done, but being “consumed with regret for things I didn’t do, the choices I didn’t make, the things I didn’t say” (143).

“A Young Man’s Long, Awkward, Occasionally Tragic, and Frequently Humiliating Education in Affairs of the Heart, Part 2: The Crush” The author again describes having a deep crush on a girl named Zaheera but feeling unable to ask her out, and so settling for being her best friend. This relationship, he writes, continued for a while, until one day she was no longer at school. When he asked a mutual friend what happened, she says that Zaheera and her family immigrated to America, and that Zaheera was sad about it because she had a crush on Trevor and was hoping he would ask her out. If he had, the author writes, his life would have been changed forever: but he did not, and now he will never know.

Preface to “Colorblind” – The author describes how, in the all-white neighborhood to which his mother moved their family, he was only able to make friends with the children of domestics, black servants to white families who were allowed to keep their own families with them.

Colorblind – The author describes his friendship with Teddy, the son of a domestic and as much of a troublemaker and thrill-seeker as he was. He writes of how, one night, he and Teddy were interrupted while shoplifting; how they ran, to escape being caught; and how he managed to do so, but Teddy did not. Later, the author writes, he was confronted about possible involvement, including being shown a surveillance video that showed Teddy clearly, but showed him less so, the black-and-white footage picking him out as white, not mixed. The facial features were clear enough, he says, but because the white people looking at the video believed the second boy to be white, they were unable to see the features, only the complexion. “These people,” he writes, “had been so fucked by their on construct of race that they could not see that the white person they were looking for was sitting right in front of them” (159).

Preface to Chapter 14 – The author writes of how part of the apartheid system involved having several languages in order to keep society both functioning and at odds: there are, he writes, 11 official languages in South Africa.

“A Young Man’s Long, Awkward, Occasionally Tragic, and Frequently Humiliating Education in Affairs of the Heart, Part 3: The Dance” The author describes how, as he prepares to go to his high school dance (the equivalent of an American prom), he got help from two friends, the hyperactive Tom and the practical Bongani. Tom managed to find him a beautiful date, accompanying them every time they go out: Bongani helped him get some good clothes and a makeover. At first, Abel (who by this point had started

a car repair business) agreed to let him use a classy car, but then on the night of the dance, got drunk and made him use something less nice. That, the author says, made him late for picking up his date (Babiki). The author then writes of how he got lost driving to the dance; how the increasingly angry Babiki refused to get out of the car when they finally arrived; and how he finally realized that her silence was not about anger, but the fact that they did not have any languages in common. He then writes that he eventually took her home from the dance, and that as he dropped her off … she kissed him, leading him to think "I have no idea how girls work" (179).

Analysis

The particularly noteworthy element of these three chapters is how they explore the different ways in which the author's skin color affected his life. The middle chapter is perhaps among the most interesting in the book, in that it is a rare instance in which the author's skin color has a positive effect, essentially ensuring that he escapes the consequences of his actions. This is not to suggest that what happened was right, or just: in fact, the positive outcome has a significant layer of irony associated with it, in that if justice had truly been served, the author would have faced at least some consequence for his actions.

On the other side of the coin, the author's skin color (or rather, his beliefs about his skin color) is portrayed, in "A Young Man … Part 2) as having a more negative effect, of the sort that the author has come to expect – or, at least, to which he has become accustomed. Finally, "Young Man … Part 3" is perhaps notable not so much for its exploration of language as for its turning the tables on the author's facility with languages, which are referred to earlier in the book as a strength, but in the situation described here ends up not helping at all. The overall take-away from these three chapters is the idea that a strength is not always a strength, and a weakness is not always a weakness. This idea becomes something of a motif in the book's latter sections, in which the author portrays himself as a hustler, always looking for (and generally able to find) a strength in any weakness.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include another tension-building reference to Abel's unsavory-ness (which, in turn, is another iteration of the motif associated with the author's dislike of second-hand cars) and, perhaps most notably of all, the comment at the end of "Colorblind" about race perception. This is a clear, and quite ironic, evocation of the book's central thematic interest in the history and consequences of apartheid, portraying another way in which straightforward perception became much less so as a result of the mind-warping policies of apartheid.

Vocabulary

pustule, intermittent, reprisal, hyperactive, mesmerize

Part 3, Section 1

Summary

Preface to “Go Hitler!” The author describes how, in Germany and England, children are taught the truth about how the histories of their countries are defined by the Holocaust and the Empire respectively, and how those teachings are infused with both regret and apology. He adds, however, that there is no such sense of responsibility in the teaching about apartheid in South Africa, in the same way as there is neither a sense of responsibility or awareness of the present-day experiences of racism-defined history in America.

Go Hitler! – The author describes how, with the help of his friend Andrew and ongoing support of his friends Tom and Bongani, as well as his new friend Andrew, he expanded his food-running business into a business copying and selling CDs. The author also says that as a result of his business, he was making more money in the mid-1980’s than some people in South Africa make today.

The author then describes how his burning CD’s business morphed into his becoming a popular DJ; how, to make his dances even more popular, he and Bongani recruited a dance crew; and how the hottest dancer in that crew was named Hitler. At that point, the author explains that for black South Africans, the story of Hitler and the Holocaust was just that, a story; it did not have the same impact on them as, say, the “holocaust” of Africans who were slaughtered during the decades of European colonization. He also describes how people in South Africa just took known European names for their black, or colored, children, without really knowing what the names meant. There were also, he writes, kids named Mussolini and Napoleon. Finally, he tells the story of how he and his crew were paid to play a dance at a Jewish school; how Hitler danced, and the crew chanted “Go Hitler! Go Hitler!” as they always did, and how the dance was stopped. The teachers and staff at the school thought they were being mocked.

Preface to “The Cheese Boys” The author describes the history of the township of Alexandra, an all-black community surrounded by more affluent communities and populations and, as a result, incapable of physically (and psychologically) becoming more than what it was.

The Cheese Boys – The author describes the complex, bustling, sometimes violent, always interesting way of life in Alexandra, revealing that that is where Bongani lived and where the author spent several productive years after high school earning money to live on his own (there is a fleeting reference to how uncomfortable and potentially violent life was at home with Abel). The author then writes about how economic success and social status were ultimately defined by whether someone could afford cheese; he and Bongani were both making relatively good money, so they were called “cheese boys.” He describes the complicated, multi-angled hustles he and Bongani engaged in, some criminal and some not, but the whole while making more and more money.

Finally, the author describes two incidents that made him realize the dangerous, limiting, criminal reality of the life he was living. First, he was asked to re-sell a stolen camera, which he found was filled with photographs of a white family: this, he says, made him realize there were real repercussions to what he was doing. The second incident was when he and his dance crew were stopped on the way home from a dance party, framed for having a gun in the vehicle (which they did not have), and were forced to arrange for a bribe to be paid to the police. This, the author writes, made him realize two things: that the lie of success he had been telling himself was just that, a lie; and that he, complexioned as he was, had options where the others in his crew did not.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how the author once again, with relative subtlety, draws parallels between the history of entrenched, legalized racism in South Africa and the history of racism in America. He implies that both countries would do well to follow the model of once-colonialist Germany and Great Britain and establish a sense of regret for, or at least awareness of, the suffering that those race-defined polices brought to millions of people.

Meanwhile, the darkly humorous story of the dancer named Hitler brings to light an aspect of South African culture of which many North American readers would not be aware. It is somehow both surprising and not surprising that the name “Hitler” (or, for that matter, the names Mussolini or Napoleon) would not have the same meaning in South Africa as they have in the West. The surprise comes from the fact that there is generally consistent western awareness of just how monstrous Hitler, his government, and their actions were. The lack of surprise comes when the reader considers that, as the author points out, those suffering in South Africa had their own genocides to worry about. All that said, the images and narrative of the dancer Hitler performing at the Jewish school are, in many ways, jaw-dropping in their incongruity and bleak, bleak irony.

Interesting elements of “The Cheese Boys” include the narrative portrayal of life in the unpredictable, volatile, street-wise Alexandra township; the unlikeliness of access to cheese being a barometer of success; and the evocation of the book’s thematic exploration of how life is, or can be, lived while under the constant threat of violence. It is important to note that here, that violence comes not only from the racism-focused authorities and not only from the drunken Abel (whose appearance here again foreshadows vivid violence to come). Violence also comes, the author suggests, from people just like the author himself, people desperately trying to do whatever they can not even to improve their lives, but just to STAY alive.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

disclaimer, mythical, gravitate, fluidity, lithe, meticulous, palatial, cordon, dissipate, periodically, placid, hierarchy, leverage, barter, equivalent, gravitational, ramification, empathize, berate

Part 3, Section 2

Summary

Preface to “The World Doesn’t Love You” The author describes an incident of the kind of tough-love his mother gave him: letting him get arrested so he would learn to not disobey her.

The World Doesn’t Love You – The author describes the circumstances that led him to getting arrested – essentially, borrowing one of Abel’s cars and putting unregistered plates on it to do an errand, and then getting stopped by the police. When he was taken to jail, he writes, he put on a façade of toughness to protect himself from being attacked. He tried to convince himself that life in jail is like life in prison, and that he would have it pretty good, but then, when he finally got to court (after making arrangements through a cousin to have a lawyer), the author encountered people who actually were in prison and realized how mistaken he was.

As he waited in a holding cell for his court appearance, the author writes, he tried to figure out which racial group of prisoners he belonged to, eventually settling on the relatively safe white group. Finally, he was called into the courtroom, where he initially broke down in fear and anxiety, but was eventually released on bail. When he got home, he writes, he found out that his mother knew what had happened and had paid his bail, in spite of his effort to keep everything secret from her. Not only had the cousin contacted her, but she had noticed the missing car, and figured out what had happened. The chapter, and this particular story, conclude with her telling the author that everything she ever did for him was out of love for him because, she says, “the world doesn’t love [him]” (243).

Analysis

In many ways, this chapter is a prologue to the next, and final chapter in the book, developing narrative and thematic momentum as the book builds to its climaxes in the following section. Themes developed here include the consequences of living under apartheid, the consequences of living under a constant threat of violence, and perhaps most notably, the influence and nature of a mother’s love. Because the author’s mother is so clearly portrayed throughout the book as having a powerful religious faith, it is also possible that chapter carries an implied exploration of the book’s thematic interest in the combination of personal power and faith. It might even be inferred that the author’s mother does what she does for her son out of a belief that it is not only the right thing to do, but the Christian thing to do. The chapter’s closing lines, however, raise an interesting question: is it the whole world that does not love her son, or just the immediate world (i.e. apartheid-infused South Africa)?

Finally, the reference to Abel in this chapter, as all the previous references have done, foreshadows powerfully significant events that are finally revealed in the following chapter, in which the story of the most significant elements of the relationship between Abel, the author, and the author's mother forms the narrative and thematic climax of the book.

Vocabulary

assumption, infraction, plausible, profanity, pittance, dutiful, decimate

Part 3, Section 3

Summary

Preface to “My Mother’s Life” The author writes of a time when he was ill, and his mother insisted they go to church to pray for help from Jesus. He tried to argue, he says, but as always, she won.

In "My Mother’s Life,” the author writes of how his mother’s relationship with Abel began (he was the mechanic who repeatedly and reliably fixed her troublesome car); how he warned his mother not to marry Abel (something about him, the author writes, just was not right); and how his mother refused to fit in with Abel’s very traditional family. The author describes how, once he and the author’s mother were married, Abel began getting increasingly drunk more and more often. Finally, the author describes one night in which Abel came home drunk and forgot a pot on the stove, which caught fire. The author’s mother caught it in time, and was in the middle of berating Abel for his carelessness when he lost his temper and hit her - twice. She took her children (by then she had given birth to the author’s younger brother) and went to the police, but they refused to file charges. That night, the author writes, he realized the police were men first, police officers second. For some years after that, nothing more happened.

After a difficult time in which the entire family participated in the running of Abel’s failed business (for which, the author writes, his mother sacrificed all her hard-won financial success), the author writes that his mother once again pursued independence and, as a result, Abel’s drunkenness increased. So, too, did his capacity for violence. The author describes in detail the first time Abel hit him, and the subsequent pattern of how the family functioned over the next few years: Abel would erupt in violence, there would be silence for six weeks or so, and then slowly things would get back to normal.

Eventually, the author writes, his mother separated herself from Abel in every way she could except a full departure. She told the author that if she left, Abel would kill the family. Therefore, she stayed, even after Abel hit her with a bicycle. The author writes of how she got pregnant during a rare phase of reunion, and had another child, Isaac, which led the author to separate himself from her and his family. He could no longer be around what he saw as her self-destructiveness. His mother, he writes, had understood: she had done the same thing with her own family. Eventually, however, things just got too much for her. The author describes how she moved out and remarried.

The author then describes how one day, while coming home from church, his mother and her new husband were ambushed by Abel, who shot her first in the leg and then, after the gun misfired several times, in the head. When the author was notified, he says, he raced to the hospital where he was shocked by both her appearance and by the fact that because she had no health insurance, she was going to be transferred to another hospital. He prepared to put all her bills on his credit card, hesitating for a moment when the nurse warned him how much her treatment might cost, but then (as he tells it)

realizing the value of selflessness. In that moment, he says, he passed the nurse his card.

Eventually, the author writes, and by what the doctors describe as a miracle, his mother survived with only minor injuries, joking in the aftermath that she was now the most beautiful person in the family. The author describes how he and his mother laughed at that comment, “Mother and son, laughing together through the pain in an intensive-care recovery room on a bright and sunny and beautiful day” (282).

Epilogue to “My Mother’s Life” - The author describes how, in the aftermath of the shooting, Abel planned to kill himself, but was talked out of it by a cousin who convinced him to take responsibility for what he did. Eventually, the author writes, after a long and complicated legal process, Abel received only probation, and to this day is a free man.

The book concludes with “the final piece of the story” (283). After she was first shot in the leg, the author’s mother began praying – and the gun kept misfiring. Later, the author writes, he was told by his mother that she did, in fact, have health insurance: Jesus. The author jokes that Jesus was not around to pay the hospital bill. His mother said “You’re right. He didn’t. But He blessed me with the son who did” (284).

Analysis

This chapter contains the book’s narrative and thematic climax – that is, the point of most significant intensity in terms of event and meaning. It is important to note that the book does not contain what might be defined as traditional, linear structure that might lead to a sense of climax; instead, what contributes most to the sense of narrative climax in this chapter is the previous sequence of increasingly dark references to Abel’s unpredictability and his capacity for violence. In other words, the events of this chapter have been foreshadowed quite heavily throughout the book, and in all likelihood do not necessarily come as a surprise. They would arguably come as a shock, given the intensity and circumstances the author describes: but a surprise, no.

In thematic terms, virtually all the book’s themes also climax in this chapter. There can be little argument that Abel’s attitudes and actions are, in no small part, a result of living under the circumstances of apartheid and, on another level, as a result of living under the constant threat of violence. He, like black men in general living in those circumstances, lived with the danger of arbitrary arrest and/or violence every day. There is a clear sense that consequently, his fear and stress combined with his own natural tendencies to lead him to both alcohol (to numb his sharp-edged feelings) and to violence (to release those feelings).

Meanwhile, there are several references to the book’s thematic interest in the struggle for independence and identity. These include Abel’s failed struggle to achieve independence and success as a mechanic, contrasted vividly with the success of the author’s mother, both as a result of her innate abilities and her own determination. While there is clear irony in her choice to not leave (i.e. a determinedly independent woman

choosing to remain in a situation in which she herself is constantly under a threat of violence), the author is at pains to explain her reasons for staying, reasons that were, in turn, given to him. In those reasons, the reader can see development, or evocation, of another of the book's themes: the power of a mother's love. There is a clear sense that the author's mother believes that by sacrificing herself (as she has done, in various ways, throughout her son's life) she is, in fact, protecting the person she loves most. That sense of sacrifice, however, clearly lasts only so long: she comes to a place where she feels her life seriously threatened and, in a manifestation of her original determination to achieve independence and her own identity, she leaves for a new and better life.

A new element introduced in this chapter is the way in which gender roles and sexism, and the discriminatory actions and attitudes associated with both, interact with the discriminatory actions and attitudes associated with apartheid. There is the clear sense here that the lack of justice meted out to Abel in consequence of his actions results from the fact that his victim, the author's mother, is a black woman. A white woman attacked by a white man would likely see justice done; a white woman attacked by a black man would DEFINITELY see justice done, and probably in a horrible way; but a black woman attacked by EITHER a white man or a black man, in the way that the author's mother was, would very likely NOT see justice done, in the same way as the author's mother here receives no justice.

There is a deep, deep irony here, in that the author's mother clearly believes her life to have been saved by the intervention of Jesus in spite of the fact that Jesus never intervened to prevent the attack; never intervened to prevent any of the previous assaults; and never intervened to wake up Abel to the suffering he was causing, or the suffering that caused him to INFLICT suffering. All that said, neither the author nor his mother makes the claim explicitly, but the reference to prayer in relation to the bullets that misfired clearly indicates that, for the author's mother, faith saved her life. This idea also relates to the implication of the book's final lines: that the author's mother believes that her son's life to this point has been shaped and/or protected by Jesus so that her son can help her receive, and benefit from, and live as a result of, the medical care she needs. The inclusion of this aspect of the story by the author does not necessarily suggest that he shares his mother's belief. The fact, however, that he makes no comment ON that belief, but instead presents the facts, DOES suggest that he might, after all, have found something in HER faith that he can have faith in.

This, ultimately, is the most significant theme explored in this section: that the presence and power of religious faith might, in fact, have influence that, to use a phrase from the Christian prayer book, truly passeth all understanding.

Vocabulary

surrogate, docile, promiscuous, subservient, explosive, ricochet, condescending, flabbergasted, inevitable, hemorrhage, futility, escalate, sporadic, retribution, analogy, respite, catharsis, vindicate

Important People

The Author (Trevor Noah)

The author is primarily known as a television commentator and comedian – specifically, as the host of the political satire program, “The Daily Show” on The Comedy Network in the United States and online. The book is a memoir of his origins in apartheid-era South Africa, a situation in which virtually everything about the society was defined not only by legal, governmental, and economic distinctions between races, but by negative, destructive attitudes of whites towards non-whites. The author’s mixed-race origins (that is: his mother was black, his father was white) made him, according to the apartheid system and as his title suggests, “born a crime,” in that intimate, reproductive relationships between whites and blacks were illegal. As such, and as he discusses at length in the book, he was an outcast from almost every community he attempted to enter, or felt as though he could belong to.

The author’s narrative, however, indicates that this experience of being an outcast originated not only in his racial origins and not only in the apartheid-defined circumstances of his birth, but also in his character, personality, and goals. He was, as he discusses at length, something of a troublemaker, a rebel and a rule-breaker, in much the same way as his mother was. His questioning mind, his rebellious spirit, and his tendency towards mischievous independence set him apart from almost everyone around him, giving him both more opportunities than most, more knowledge than most, and more determination to be more than what his circumstances seemed determined to turn him into.

What is particularly interesting about the author and his perspectives, as revealed in his book, is that he does not seem at all embittered. He does seem angry; he does seem somewhat resentful; but he does not seem as though his view of his homeland, and of the world in general, has become cynical or hard-eyed. It is clear-eyed and uncompromising, but relatively objective and focused. In his writing at least, he sees the illogic, the humanity, and the dangers of things as they are, seeing even the darkest circumstances as opportunities to learn, grow, and transcend. This, it seems, he learned from the person he describes as having the most important influence on his life – his spirited, independence-minded mother.

The Author's Mother (Patricia)

The author's mother, as he portrays her throughout the narrative, was a complex, powerful mixture of spirituality and earthy practicality, of faith and discipline, and of blunt practicality and deep feeling. She was, on the one hand, a devout Christian, convinced that Jesus was looking out for her and convinced of the value of a strict religious practice: on the other hand, she was clearly a potent individualist, determined to live her life on her own terms and not those of either the racism-defined apartheid regime or the

tradition-defined expectations of her family. While she passed on her determination to better herself to her son, she was not able to pass on her religious faith, despite her many determined attempts to do so. Nevertheless, it is clear from what the author writes about her that she was what he says she was - the most significant influence on his life in a number of ways.

The Author's Father (Robert)

The author's father was white, Swiss, and generally distant. There was little or no deep, relationship-defining love between him and the author's mother: there was, however, affection and respect, a shared sense of responsibility for the well-bringing and upbringing of the child they brought into the world. In his own way, the author's father was as much of a determined individualist and activist as the author's mother, but with a much quieter perspective and set of behaviors.

The author portrays his father as being present in his life, if not a terribly active participant in his son's upbringing. The author's mother was determined that her son should have a sense of a father figure in his life, but at the same time, was determined that hers would be the dominant influence, given that she knew the culture in which the author was being raised in more depth than his father would, or did. This is perhaps why the author's father, over time, became increasingly distant from his son, a circumstance that the author portrays himself as resenting for a number of years. That resentment, it seems, disappeared when the author made an effort to re-institute contact with his father, and discovered how much his father had invested in tracking his career and paying his own version of attention to what his son had been doing with his life.

Abel

Abel is the violent, traditional man who eventually became the husband of the author's mother. The author portrays him as being superficially charming and like-able, but with an air of barely suppressed anger about him that seemed to be apparent only to those who spent extensive private time with him. The author writes of how Abel's incompetence as a businessman undermined his dreams for status and success; how his failure in business deepened his tendencies towards alcoholism and violence; and how those tendencies erupted into physical attacks on both the author and his mother. One of those attacks (on the author's mother) became almost fatal, but because of a lack of evidence combined with traditional, cultural views on male-female relationships, Abel (who at one point had become suicidal because of what he had done) faced no legal consequences for what he did.

Andrew

Andrew is the author's much younger stepbrother, born to his mother and Abel. Andrew plays a relatively small role in the narrative, but is nonetheless significant, in that the

way he was treated by Abel (as an almost sacred eldest son) was a vivid contrast to how dismissively and violently the author was treated.

Maylene, Zaheera, and Babiki

These three young women appear in three different chapters exploring the author's relationships with girls. The stories of the author's interactions with them follow a similar pattern: the author experiences attraction; the author attempts to develop some kind of relationship; and the author's attempts end in not only failure, but uncertainty and confusion. The portrayals of the young women are colorful but sketchy: the author never really goes into their identities or characters in any significant depth.

Bongani

Bongani is portrayed as being the author's best friend and ally during his adolescence, something of a partner in crime. Bongani had a bit more perspective on the author and his situation than the author did himself, and managed to slow the author down just enough to smooth some of his rough edges.

Hitler

Hitler was one of the author's friends during his frenetic, hustling adolescence. While the author would provide the music for large, noisy, sometimes violent parties, Hitler and a few other friends would dance. Hitler is notable for his name, which the author suggests came about because of a not-uncommon circumstance in South Africa: people giving names to children because of their association with singular qualities, often without regard to their singular histories. Thus, Hitler was given the name of a man whose history was not well-known but whose power and capacities for leadership were, it seems, things that Hitler's parents (the South African Hitler) wanted to foster in their son.

Nelson Mandela

The renowned civil rights leader is referred to only a few times in the narrative, but is nonetheless a potent presence, in that his leadership and example inspired many, including the author, to believe that apartheid and its sufferings truly could be transcended.

Jesus

Jesus is an important figure in the narrative not for the author, but for the author's mother, whose dependence on Jesus' protection, example, and spiritual guidance was the defining influence in her life. Her relationship with Jesus reaches its highest point of

significance in the book's final chapter, in which the potentially fatal attack by Abel is, according to the author's mother, deflected by Jesus' intervention, the consequence of her fervent prayers.

The Different South African Races

The apartheid system in South Africa was developed and enforced with the aim of keeping the various races in the country not only separated but in conflict with each other. The governing white race established and maintained strict, violent control over the two other main races - black people (and the individual tribes to which they belonged) and colored people (everyone else who didn't fall into one category or the other). The aims and actions of apartheid succeeded in their goal: the three South African races, as the author writes, co-existed in an atmosphere of deep, confrontational, suspicious tension for years, a situation that continues in contemporary South African society decades after apartheid officially ended.

Objects/Places

Apartheid

Apartheid is the name given to the social, economic, political, and legal state of governance in South Africa for almost 50 years in the middle of the twentieth Century. The causes, conditions, and consequences of apartheid are too numerous to go into in this analysis: the author goes into a few in his book, examining it from both a personal and a cultural perspective. The bottom line point to note about apartheid is that it was based in, and defined by, principles anchored in racism: specifically, that the white race was superior on just about every level to any non-white race, particularly blacks.

South Africa

South Africa is a relatively large, independent nation on the southernmost tip of Africa. It is the home of a large number of ethnic tribes, or independent communities, and was colonized by white European settlers in the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s. These colonists steadily and systematically instituted laws that repressed and exploited the region's indigenous citizens, to the point where racism was institutionalized in the form of apartheid, which lasted until the mid-1990's. Since that time, and in the author's lifetime, the country's recovery from apartheid has been slow and unstable, with many lingering after-effects of the system's corruptions and destructive practices.

Soweto

Soweto is one of the largest and poorest townships in South Africa, populated almost entirely by non-whites. Infested with poverty and instability, it was the author's home for many of his formative years.

Alexandra

Alexandra is another South African township, also populated almost entirely by non-Caucasians. In contrast to the relatively quiet Soweto, Alexandra was bustling and violent, with large numbers of its citizens engaging in borderline criminal activities in order to simply keep themselves alive.

Religion

According to the author, the practice of religion, particularly Christianity, plays an important role in the lives of many South Africans, even though it is, essentially, the religion of the country's oppressors. This aspect of the culture of South Africa is

particularly apparent in the individual experience of the author's black mother, whose unquestioning faith in Jesus and His power is a defining, governing factor in her life.

Language

Throughout the narrative, there are two key representations of language and its importance. The first, the author writes, has to do with the fact that language was used, by those who formulated the principles and practices of apartheid, to create division among the various tribes and communities in South Africa. The second and contrasting value of language, the author also writes, was as a way of connecting with others: if someone eager to engage with a particular group or micro-community could identify which tribal language was being spoken by that group, it made acceptance easier and quicker. In other words, there were two sides of the same coin - language as divider, language as uniter.

Fufi

Fufi was not an object, per se: she was the author's dog when he was a boy. She was originally believed to be quite stupid, but eventually turned out to be quite deaf. Fufi's relationship with another boy, who cared for her as much as the author did, was a key factor in the author's acquisition of wisdom in relation to relationships - more specifically, how being in any kind of relationship with another being did not entitle anyone to an experience or a perspective of ownership.

Mighty Mechanics

This was the shop that was established, run, and closed by the author's stepfather, Abel. He was a good mechanic but a troubled man and a poor businessman. The author's mother made major sacrifices in order to keep the business going, but much to Abel's disappointment, it ended up closing.

Secondhand Cars

Throughout the narrative, the author makes semi-joking, semi-serious references to his belief that the bad things that happened to him were all associated with secondhand cars. He supports this contention with descriptions of several dangerous, upsetting, awkward incidents that he connects with the secondhand cars that were involved.

Abel's Gun

At one point, deep in his violent, abusive, drunken relationship with the author's mother, Abel purchased a gun that the author and his mother believed would eventually bring even greater violence into their lives. In the final chapter of the book, the author reveals

how that belief eventually became a reality, with Abel's shooting attack on the author's mother. What is particularly noteworthy about that attack, aside from the fact that it proved an unavoidable turning point in the relationship between Abel and the author's mother, is that it failed to work in the middle of the attack, for no apparent mechanical reason. The author's mother attributed the failure to the power of prayer, but the author remains unconvinced.

America

While the book contains several glancing references to other countries and regimes that shared a racist foundation with the apartheid regime in South Africa, the author makes significantly more frequent references to experiences of racism in the United States of America. He pays particular attention to the parallels between slavery and other specific manifestations of particularly racist attitudes in America, drawing clear connections between the negative experiences of blacks and the dominant powers of whites there and in South Africa.

Themes

The History and Consequences of Apartheid

The author experienced the negative effects of apartheid (the racism-defined system of government and law that governed life in in South Africa for almost 50 years) on levels ranging from the cultural to the individual. In virtually the same breath, he writes of how institutionalized laws, such as those against fraternization between whites and non-whites, made even casual conversation between individuals a potentially criminal act at the same time as entire micro-communities, or tribes, were set against each other in the same way as the broad-strokes communities of white, colored, and black. While many of the book's comments on the history, origins, and outcomes of apartheid (that is: its big picture, macro-cosmic aspects) are contained in the prefaces to the various chapters, it is important to note that each of the incidents (or series of incidents) described in the chapters themselves (that is, the small picture, micro-cosmic aspects of living within the apartheid regime) contain either direct or indirect evocations of those comments. In other words, in his analysis of, and commentary on, the apartheid system, the author reveals how the cultural, the political, and the legal became personal.

What is particularly noteworthy about the book's multi-leveled consideration of apartheid is how the author puts the system and its effects in an even larger context: a consideration of the international history of similar regimes. He clearly draws connections between the racism-defined motivations and manifestations of apartheid and, for example, both British Imperialism and German Nazism. Interestingly, and tellingly, he makes more vividly (and more frequently developed comparisons between apartheid and the history of racist attitudes in the United States, drawing parallels to everything from slavery (in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries) to the civil rights movement (the Mid-Twentieth Century) to the more recent spate of shootings of black people in the early Twenty-First Century. By doing this, he awakens potential worldwide audiences to echoes of their own experiences in the stories of what happened to him, clearly suggesting that while his experiences are unique to him as a person, they are not unique to him as a non-white.

The Constant Threat of Violence

At the same time as the author was living under the constant threat of violence from the apartheid system within which he was living, he was also living under a similarly constant threat of violence from his family. This latter violence came in two forms. The first was the violence of his mother, a hardline but compassionate disciplinarian who, like most parents of the time and place, used corporal punishment as a means of helping her children modify their behavior – or, at least, trying to help them: such was the fundamental character of the author that her efforts rarely worked. The second form of violence in the author's family entered his life as he was starting to mature into adolescence, appearing in the form of Abel, the short-tempered boyfriend (and eventual

husband) of the author's mother. Abel was responsible for several beatings that both the author and his mother experienced, notably leaving his own blood offspring (his son Andrew, the author's younger half-brother) unscathed.

There are several noteworthy differences between the three contexts of violence within which the author grew up. The primary difference relates to the violence he experienced at the hands of his mother; he quotes her saying that she was hard on him, physically and verbally and emotionally, because she loved him and she desperately needed him to be aware of the dangerous world in which he was living. Her violence, she says (and he agrees) was her attempt to warn him, to remind him of those dangers, and to teach him that her advice on the subject was meant to be obeyed. There is a clear connection here between this idea and the main difference between this atmosphere of violence and that of living under apartheid: again, as the author's mother says (and again as he agrees), there was no love in the apartheid system and the violence that was so much a part of it. The violence of apartheid was not about discipline: it was about fear, control, and deep down, an urge to destroy.

This last, in turn, was a key component of the violence, or threat thereof, surrounding Abel. The author writes of his instinct that there was something not right about the man who became his stepfather, and the book's stories of Abel bear that out. He was an alcoholic, a sexist (albeit one whose attitudes were shaped by culture and circumstance) and, it seems, frequently blinded by a desire to cause pain and gain power or control. Of the three sorts and circumstances of violence that surrounded the author, he portrays himself as being far more genuinely afraid of Abel than of the other two sources of violence in his life.

Striving for Independence and Identity

Overall, the book suggests that there was little that triggered acts of violence against the author more than his acting on his innate, seemingly irresistible desire to live life his own way, and on his own terms. He did what he wanted, when he wanted to do it, constantly finding ways to bend, break, or get around the rules of behavior imposed by apartheid, his mother, or by Abel. The author portrays himself as never being destructive or contradictory for his own sake, but rather because he saw his way of doing things, seeing things, or hoping for things as simply being better - more productive, or more connected to his beliefs about himself and about the world.

What is particularly interesting about this aspect of the book, and about the author's sense of self, is that he clearly comes by it all naturally; he is, in many ways, following in his mother's footsteps. As the author himself explains, his mother created her life in exactly the same way, for much the same reasons, and with many of the same consequences. She wanted to create a life for herself that was better, freer, and fuller than the life that apartheid, tradition, and her family wanted her to live, so she made choices and took risks that, the author suggests, very few would, did, or got away with in the same way as his mother. A particularly interesting aspect of the book that it never really explores in depth is how both the author and his mother navigated this apparent

paradox: the tendency of the author's mother to simultaneously punish the author for breaking rules while, at the same time, encouraging to find himself in the same, generally rule-breaking way (and for the same, generally rule-breaking reasons) as she did.

Here it is important to note that Abel, like the woman he married and the young man to whom he eventually became a stepfather, also tried to establish a sense of independence and identity: through the establishment of his own repair shop. His attempt was limited to this area of business; he was not a rule breaker in terms of, for example, the traditional boundaries around male-female relationships in which he grew up in the same way as the author's mother was. What is also interesting to note is that where both the author and his mother succeeded, to some degree, in developing independence and identity, Abel failed – as a businessman, as an authoritarian husband and father. This is arguably the reason why the threat of violence, in and around him, so often exploded into action.

The Influence and Nature of a Mother's Love

The determination of the author's mother - to give them both a good, healthy, relatively prosperous life; to give her son an education, both at home and at school; and to keep her son not only safe but alive - all resulted in the author becoming something beyond anything he ever imaged he could be. Without the presence of his mother in his life, the author contends, he would be nowhere near the person, or the kind of person, he now is. All that said, the author unhesitatingly portrays himself as occasionally making his mother's job harder than it perhaps needed to be. The author also portrays the punishment and disappointment he engendered when his actions and choices went beyond what his mother felt she could reasonably tolerate. Here it is interesting to note that the author's mother practiced what author and reader alike would call tough love: letting him learn lessons about himself and about the world by allowing him to experience the consequences of his choices … at least, to a point. Her decision to allow him to stay in jail, for example, following his arrest for driving what appeared to be a stolen car without a license, only went far enough to scare him, rather than so far that it damaged him. This is a key point: the author may have been exasperated, irritated, or even angered by his mother, but as he says, even in the moments when he was most resentful of her attempts to shape him, he knew that she did what she did because she loved him. She told him so, in both words and actions.

This is most poignantly and powerfully true in the story of the relationship between the author, his mother, and Abel. As Abel became increasingly violent, the author writes, his mother became increasingly victimized and he (the author) became increasingly angry that this seemingly strong-willed woman would let herself be treated as she was, and stay in that situation when she had the strength to get out. His anger, in fact, reached such a point of intensity that he cut her out of his life for a while. It was only when he finally allowed himself to realize and accept her truth – that she was doing what she did to protect him and his younger half-brother – that he realized that she was, as always,

acting out of love for him, making what some might call close to a supreme sacrifice out of love for her family.

The Presence and Power of Religious Faith

There are points in the narrative when it becomes challenging to discern which is the dominant force that drives the attitudes and actions of the author's mother - her personal determination or her absolute, unquestioning religious faith. The two are completely entwined, much to the clear exasperation of her son, who is both ambitious and logic-minded to a degree that was, it seems, similarly exasperating to his mother.

The faith of the author's mother, it seems, was simultaneously boundless (in that she believed Jesus could solve any problem and ease any pain) and clearly defined (Jesus acted to ease pain only in certain ways, and could be accessed only in certain ways). For her he was always present, but not always active: what her son saw as capriciousness and unpredictability in Jesus' bestowing of his blessings and protections, his mother saw as Jesus providing opportunity for individuals to make the right choices. If there was suffering, she believed, it was the result of wrong choices, which meant that suffering indicated the presence of a lesson to be learned. Ultimately, for the author's mother, Jesus was there when she really needed him, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the book's climax: the story of Abel's shooting of her author's mother, and her survival, which she entirely attributes to the power of her prayer that Jesus save her life.

It is perhaps to the author's credit that he does not actively reject, deny, or debunk her beliefs. In relation to her belief that Jesus saved her life, the author presents the facts (that several bullets, aimed directly at her, actually misfired with no apparent cause), and he presents her response to those facts (that the misfiring began the moment she began to pray), all within the previously well-established context of his mother's deep personal faith. The author makes no conclusion either way: he does not suggest that his mother was right, and that Jesus intervened, nor does he suggest that his mother is delusional, and that there must have been an as-yet undiscovered scientific or logical, reason for the misfiring. He leaves the conclusion up to the reader: is it, in fact, possible that something (Jesus?) took action to save his mother's life? This is, perhaps, the ultimate development of this theme: the idea that religious faith can, even in the mind of skeptics like the author, create at least the possibility of its own existence in the mind of a non-believer.

Styles

Structure

For the most part, this book does not follow what might be described as conventional structure: that is, beginning-middle-end, following a line of action that, in conventional narratives, would build to a climax. There is a broad strokes sense of chronology, of events being described in roughly the order in which they occurred: the narrative moves from the author's experiences of childhood, through his experiences of adolescence, and into his experiences of young-adulthood. In terms of the construction of any kind of plot or straightforward through-line, though, there generally is not one. Instead, the narrative is primarily anecdotal, or episodic, consisting primarily of memoir-like narrations of particular incident that are given a degree of context and occasionally contain narrative and thematic echoes of other such incidents. If there is anything approaching a through-line, it is the author's exploration of his family's relationship with the exceedingly violent and unpredictable Abel, whose attitude and actions are referred to frequently throughout the narrative and with increasing vividness, to the point that the events of Part 3, Section 3 do feel like a kind of climax, even if there is not a plot building to it.

Another key point to note about the book's structure is that each chapter is given a preface, printed in bold type and set apart from the chapter that follows. In general, these prefaces offer historical perspective and context, primarily defining various aspects of the social, cultural, and political system of apartheid. In other words, the prefaces define the big-picture circumstances within which the author and his family lived his life. Occasionally, the prefaces look at issues closer to home – the relationship the author's mother had with faith, for example.

Interestingly, the bolded, set-apart format is also followed in what is, in many ways, the book's epilogue. Following the conclusion of Part 3 , Chapter 3, the book presents, in bold-typeface, the aftermath of the shooting that almost cost the author's mother her life. The idea of providing context is carried through as well, with the writing of this particular piece of prose providing explanation, or insight, into the circumstances of the author's mother's survival, and of her love for, and faith in, her son.

Perspective

The first point to note about the book's perspective is that it is written in first person, past tense narrative, from the author's individual perspective – that of having grown up as the child of mixed-race race parentage within a socio-political-economic system that was designed to oppress, on just about every level, anyone who was not purely Caucasian. The author's perspective, therefore, is that of someone whose experience was that of the title – born a crime – and whose entire experience of life, at least to the point at which this memoir concludes, was defined by the legal, implied, and reluctantly

accepted consequences of being a living act of transgression. He writes clearly and uncompromisingly of the difficulties of this situation, revealing awareness of the ways in which his personal situation and that of his home country had not only global causes and repercussions but also echoes of the situation in other countries where race is an issue. For example, he pays particular attention to issues of black/white relations in America.

Within those broad-strokes parameters, the author's perspective is not only defined by his legal status, but by other key factors. The most significant of these is his relationship with his mother, loving and grateful almost to the point of being worshipful but, at the same time, marked by challenge and confrontation – partly because of the author's innate personality (i.e. unable and unwilling to accept anything on, or at, face value), partly because of his (not unrelated) lack of shared religious belief, and partly because of his mother's apparent determination to at least try to keep him safe from the dangers of the world in which they both lived, and in which they were both criminals.

The final point to note about the author's perspective relates to his experience and role as a comedian. For further consideration of this aspect of the book's perspective, see "Tone", below.

Tone

It would be inappropriate to say that the author treats the darknesses of his personal and political subjects with any kind of lightness or lack of significance, but there is a frequent sense of irony and of finding the often incongruous humor in an otherwise very bleak situation. If it were not such a terrible pun, the phrase "black humor" would be a possible way to describe this aspect of the author's perspective – but, on the other hand, given his sharp-eyed, blunt irreverence, pun and all it might actually be the perfect way.

This is not to say that the narrative is full of wisecracks, or joking: many of the author's subjects are deeply serious, and many narrative glimpses of the lives lived at the time, including his own, are gritty to the point of being shocking. It is important to note, however, that the author is never shocking for its own sake. In general, the writing gives the impression of matter-of-fact-ness, of a clear-eyed, directly stated, objective honesty that neither pulls its punches nor overstates its case. Things were as they were – or, in some cases, things were as they continue to be, in that the author frequently refers to ways of being and living, under apartheid, that continue today, in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa and, indeed, in many racism-defined socio-political systems around the world. The violence is the violence; the absurdities are the absurdities; the joys, such as they were, are the joys. There is an undertone of anger to much of the writing, but there is little or no ranting.

Quotes

If it hadn’t been for the Volkswagen that didn’t work, we never would have looked for the mechanic who became the husband who became the stepfather who became the man who tortured us for years and put a bullet in the back of my mother’s head …”
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 1, Section 1)

Importance: This quote is an initial reference to an ongoing motif in the book: the author's association of secondhand cars (such as the Volkswagen referred to here) with bad things in his life (such as the presence of the man he here describes). On another level, the reference to this man (Abel) foreshadows later references to the man's violence, including his role in the events that define the book's overall climax.

Where most children are proof of their parents’ love, I was the proof of their criminality.
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 1, Section 1)

Importance: In this pithy quote, which clearly relates to the book's title, the author sums up one of the dominating principles of his life - that as a result of his parents' actions, he literally was "born a crime."

Everyone knows that Jesus, who’s white, speaks English. The Bible is in English. Yes, the Bible was not WRITTEN in English, but the Bible came to South Africa in English so to us it’s in English. Which made my prayers the best prayers because English prayers get answered first. How do we know this? Look at white people. Clearly they’re getting through to the right person.”
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 1, Section 2)

Importance: With subtle but pointed irony, the author defines the connection between Christianity and race, a connection that, for him, infuses his reaction to his mother's intense and unwavering Christian faith.

My own family basically did what the American justice system does: I was given more lenient treatment than the black kids.”
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 1, Section 2)

Importance: This quote is one of several in the narrative that liken the experience of living under apartheid in South Africa to the experience of living under the similarly systemic racism in America: the darker the skin, the more legally endangered you are, particularly if you're male.

So many black families spend all of their time trying to fix the problems of the past. That is the curse of being black and poor, and it is a curse that follows you from generation to generation … because the generations who came before you have been pillaged, rather than being free to use your skills and education to move forward, you lose everything just trying to bring everyone behind you back up to zero.”
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 1, Section 3)

Importance: This is one of several examples in the book of how the author puts his own personal experience into a historical and socio-cultural context, describing how racism (like poverty) recreates and reproduces itself in a seemingly endless loop, or cycle.

When an African dad buys his kid a present, the last thing he's going to do is give some fat white man credit for it. African Dad will tell you straight up 'No, no, no. I bought you that."
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 1, Section 4)

Importance: In this passing commentary on the North American traditions of Christmas and Santa Claus, the author draws a pointedly comic comparison with South African tradition, a comparison which, in turn, carries with it echoes of experience living under the economic circumstances of black people living under apartheid - that is, mostly near poverty, in which anything extra like a Christmas gift was / is something to be acknowledged as a major success.

But try being a black person who immerses himself in white culture while still living in the black community. Try being a white person who adopts the trappings of black culture while still living in the white community … people are willing to accept you if they see you as an outsider trying to assimilate into their world. But when they see you as a fellow tribe member attempting to disavow the tribe, that is something they will never forgive."
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 2, Section 1)

Importance: This quote is another example of how the author's personally lived and experienced truth has universal resonances. His comment here can be seen as applying not only to race-defined experiences of being an outsider, but experiences of being an outsider in general.

With online porn today you just drop straight into the madness, but with dial-up it took so long for the images to load. It was almost gentlemanly compared to now. You'd spend a good five minutes looking at her face, getting to know her as a person. Then a few minutes later you'd get some boobs. By the time you got to her vagina, you'd spent a lot of quality time together.
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 2, Section 2)

Importance: In this quote, the author's characteristic (but infrequently deployed) sense of humor comes into play, as he comments with irony and humor on the experience of watching internet pornography on a very slow hookup (pun intended).

People don't want to be rich. They want to be able to choose. The richer you are, the more choices you have. That is the freedom of money."
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 3, Section 1)

Importance: While this quote is insightful, it must be considered within a particular context. This is a poor person's view of wealth: someone with even a moderate amount

of financial prosperity or ease would argue that having choice is of less concern than simply having more, full stop.

… crime succeeds because crime does the one thing the government doesn't do: crime cares. Crime is grassroots. Crime looks for the young kids who need support and a lifting hand. Crime offers internship programs and summer jobs and opportunities for advancement. Crime gets involved in the community. Crime doesn't discriminate."
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 3, Section 1)

Importance: This is perhaps one of the more controversial statements in the book, the idea that crime, in its most straightforward definition, exists in a clearly objective (if ruthless) context: something is, or it is not. Something is done, or it is not. Something is needed, and something is taken, or something is given. There are, in the author's implication, no shades of gray.

'I know you see me as some crazy old bitch nagging at you … but you forget the reason I ride you so hard and give you so much shit is because I love you. Everything I have ever done I've done from a place of love. If I don't punish you, the world will punish you even worse … If the police get you, the police don't love you. When I beat you, I'm trying to save you. When they beat you, they're trying to kill you.'"
-- The Author's Mother (Part 3, Section 2)

Importance: This quote sums up both one of the book's central narrative motifs (i.e. the actions taken by the author's mother to try and get him a better life) and thematic motifs (i.e. the power and value of a mother's love).

[Abel] liked to be liked by the world, which made his abuse even harder to deal with. Because if you think someone is a monster and the whole world says he's a saint, you begin to think that you're the bad person. 'It must be my fault this is happening' is the only conclusion you can draw, because why are you the only one receiving his wrath?
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 3, Section 2)

Importance: This is one of several quotes, or sections, in which the individual experience that gives rise to the author's insight can be seen as having universal implications. There is a clear sense here that these thoughts, triggered by the author's experience of living with a specifically motivated and triggered chronic abuser, are arguably the sort of thoughts experienced by just about any person who has experienced any sort of abuse.

Growing up in a home of abuse, you struggle with the notion that you can love a person you hate, or hate a person you love. It's a strange feeling. You want to live in a world where someone is good or bad, where you either hate them or love them, but that's not how people are."
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 3, Section 3)

Importance: Here again, the author posits an insight into a universal truth that arose from a particular personal experience, which in turn is connected to an experience of a

particular culture. The quote essentially suggests that, as referred to in relation to Quote 10 above, even in bleak or dangerous situations like abuse, there are no shades of gray. Love and hate, or fear, in situations such as those referred to here, are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

People say all the time that they'd do anything for the people they love. But would you really? Would you do anything? Would you give everything? I don't know that a child knows that kind of selfless love. A mother, yes. A mother will clutch her children and jump from a moving car to keep them from harm. She will do it without thinking. But I don't think the child knows how to do that, not instinctively. It's something the child has to learn."
-- The Author (Trevor Noah) (Part 3, Section 3)

Importance: In this quote from the book's final chapter, the author asks the question that, in essence, has been the point to which the entire book has been building: would you do, for a loving, self-sacrificing parent, what that parent did for you? Would you give up as much for them as they gave up for you? Who WOULD you do it for? Could you? The author portrays himself as being able to answer in the affirmative: the question posed by the book is whether the reader could say the same.

Topics for Discussion

Part 1, Section 1 – Apartheid

Apartheid in South Africa was a social, political, and cultural system of legalized racism favoring whites over blacks. Research and discuss the history and manifestations of apartheid. Why did it last as long as it did? What were its economic implications? In what ways does its influence linger in contemporary South Africa?

Part 1, Section 1 – Apartheid and Slavery

In the preface to Chapter 2, “Born a Crime,” the author draws the first of several parallels between South African apartheid and the history of black/white race relations in America. What parallels do you see in the two situations, in both principle and practice? In what ways was racism legal in America? How has the situation changed? In what ways does the influence of racism linger in America?

Part 1, Section 2 – Being a Chameleon

The author describes himself as seeing the need to, and being able to, change how he was perceived in order to both deflect violence and feel like he belonged. How, in the past, have you changed yourself in order to fit in and/or protect yourself?

Part 1, Section 2 – The Power of Language

In Part 1, Section 2, the author discusses how language was as much of a determining factor in how he was perceived by others as the color of his skin. What experiences do you have of language determining identity – not necessarily actual languages (i.e. English vs. Spanish, or French vs. German) but also dialects or accents (i.e. local ways of speaking) or language style associated with cultural origin? What about level of education – how does that affect the use of language? How does level of education affect how someone is perceived?

Part 1, Section 3 – Mother Love

The author’s close, complicated relationship with his mother is the central relationship in the book: he portrays it, in this section as elsewhere, as the relationship that had the most significant effect on shaping his identity. In what ways has your relationship with your mother shaped your identity? What kind of relationship did you have with her? How are you the same? How are you different?

Part 1, Section 3 – Self-Improvement

Both chapters in Part 1, Section 3 explore ways in which both the author and his mother strove to improve the circumstances of their lives. In what ways do you think it is important to improve your life? What examples do you have, in your life, of people who made dramatic choices and took significant steps to change themselves and / or their circumstances?

Part 1, Section 4 – Fufi and Robert

What do you see as the parallels, literal and/or metaphorical, between the author's relationship with Fufi and his relationship with his father?

Part 2, Section 1 – Valentine's Day

In his description of the events around his first Valentine's Day dance, the author tells a story that in its fundamentals (boy meets girl, boy likes girl, boy has a date with girl, girl breaks it because she wants to be with another boy instead) is a universal one: that is, its impact and meaning have, on one level, nothing to do with race. Given that Maylene was herself mixed-race; given the apartheid-defined circumstances in which the situation unfolded; and given that the author does not, in fact, reference race as a cause for Maylene's choice (his contention that it was racially oriented comes across as an assumption) … what do YOU think was the reason for her decision?

Part 2, Section 2 – Colorblind

This section contains a reference to a story in which the author's skin pigmentation worked for him. In what way or situation does his pigmentation – or rather, his belief about his pigmentation, work against him?

Part 2, Section 2 – Used Cars

In what way does the motif of the author's dislike for used cars manifest again in Part 2, Section 2?

Part 3, Section 1 – Cheese Boys

The author writes that at the time of his adolescence, success could be gauged by how much access to cheese someone had. What, in contemporary youth culture, might be considered a parallel? In other words, a young person's level of success or wealth might be defined in terms of his / her relative access to what?

Part 3, Section 2 – “The World Doesn’t Love You”

Both the title and concluding lines of “The World Doesn’t Love You” refer to the claim, made by the author’s mother, that there is no place in the world where he (and, by extension, his racial origin) can, or will be loved. There is some question as to whether it s the whole world that doesn’t love her son, or just the immediate world (i.e. apartheid-infused South Africa). Which do you think it is? Explain your answer.

Part 3, Section 3 – My Mother’s Life

The author fearlessly portrays himself as actually debating whether to pay for his mother’s medical care, asking the reader the hard question of whether there is anyone, or anything, that they would give up everything for. What is the answer to that question for you? What, if anything or anyone, would YOU give up everything for?