1-Page Book Summary of Born a Crime

Trevor Noah, the acclaimed comedian and host of The Daily Show, is mixed race. His mother is a black South African, and his father is a white Swiss-German. At the time Noah was born, during the racial oppression of apartheid in South Africa, his existence was a crime. Apartheid dictated that blacks had no legal rights as humans and were to remain separated from the white South Africans. By creating a child together, both his parents broke the law and could have been sent to prison for five years.
A Woman’s Quest to Overcome Apartheid

Noah’s mother, Patricia, raised Noah by herself against all odds. She’d grown up impoverished, as all black families did, and was sent away to live with her paternal aunt as a young child. In this new environment, Patricia was one of more than a dozen children whose families couldn’t afford them or simply didn’t want them. They were put to work, helping farm whatever meager rations could be scraped together from the infertile land to which blacks were relegated.

Patricia was fortunate in her ability to attend a missionary school nearby, where she learned English. She took her education and used it to better her life, enrolling in a secretarial course and finding work in Johannesburg through a loophole in the laws. Willfully independent, always brazen, and consistently determined, Patricia moved secretly among white society, posing as a maid so she could live in Johannesburg (where blacks were forbidden to live). She decided to have a son with a white man as an act of defiance against the laws of oppression.

An Illegal Life

Noah’s early life was one of confinement. Apartheid was still law for the first five years of Noah’s life, and a mixed child in white society raised questions. Patricia could not be seen as Noah’s mother, since a black woman with a mixed child would be conspicuous. And Robert, Noah’s father, could not have any public involvement in his son’s life. The only times Noah and his father could visit were in Robert’s apartment for fear of being found out.

As Noah grew older and concealing his skin became more difficult, Patricia engaged the services of a colored woman to pose as his mother because of their likeness in skin tones. The colored race is a culturally constructed categorization of people with varied ethnic and racial heritages. It was not illegal to be a descendent of the colored race, meaning having two colored parents, but it was illegal to be the product of race mixing, or having a black parent and a white parent. During these moments, Patricia would follow Noah and this woman, posing as the black maid.

Even in Soweto, the black township Patricia was from, Noah was kept indoors. If the neighbors or police caught wind of a mixed-race boy belonging to a black family, Noah could be sent to a colored orphanage and his family imprisoned. A life without friends and freedom encompasses Noah’s earliest memories.

A New World Brings New Questions

When Nelson Mandela was freed and apartheid abolished, Noah was able to enter the world, but his struggles to belong were just beginning. Noah struggled to fit into a cleanly categorized race, which further separated him from his community and children at school. He felt black because he was raised within the black culture, but his light skin tone told another story. He looked colored, but he was not culturally colored. He was part white, but no one thought of him as such.

It wasn’t infrequent that Noah would find himself stranded on a playground not knowing which group he belonged to. The quandary of how he fit in would rear up again and again as Noah moved from school to school, neighborhood to neighborhood, with Noah always feeling like an outsider.

To counteract his ostracization, Noah became a master of languages. There were 11 official languages in South Africa, a policy created to ensure no black tribe felt unrepresented in the new democracy. His mother made English his first language to give him a leg up in life, and he spoke his native language of Xhosa, his father’s language of German, the language of his oppressors (Afrikaans, created by the Dutch colonists pre-apartheid), and many other African tribal languages he picked up on the streets. Speaking the languages of others allowed him to relate and be viewed as “one of them,” rather than “different.”

Noah also started a lunch delivery business in high school to move among all groups and be accepted. He became known as the “tuck-shop” guy, the tuck shop being the food cart where students bought lunch. These entrepreneurial skills endeared him to his fellow classmates. He expanded his business to selling pirated CDs, finding a prowess for sales and his niche in the social sphere. Noah’s success at these business ventures would carry him through life after high school. There were no jobs available for young black men, and after meeting a friend who lived in one of the poorest and most volatile black townships, he spent the next three years engaged in a life of petty crime.

The Bond Between Mother and Son

Noah was never weak or felt sorry for himself. His mother’s strength and mission to give him a better life gave him confidence and made him inquisitive about the world. Patricia inundated his early life with books and excursions into wider society, preparing him for a world that would one day accept him.
His relationship with Patricia was loving but volatile. Noah was a rambunctious child who got into trouble frequently. He would run wild and shoplift. He pulled pranks at school and had a penchant for fire. His actions would cause him to burn down a house and, later, land himself in jail. **Patricia was a fierce disciplinarian, trying to raise her child to be a good man so he wouldn’t fall victim to a world stacked against him.** Despite these disputes, they were always a team.

But a man named Abel would change all of that. Patricia met and married Abel after apartheid ended but still during Noah's childhood. **At first, Abel was a kind and charismatic man, but his alcoholism and temper would change him into an abuser.** He started to beat both Patricia and Noah, and no one, not even the police, could stop him. It would take all of Noah's adolescent life and some of his early adult years before Patricia would find the strength to leave Abel, but by this time, the damage had been done. Noah, unable to live in the toxic environment any longer and angry at Patricia for staying with this man, separated himself and became estranged. He wouldn't reunite with his family for years, until Abel's rage had grown to such fierce heights that he attacked Patricia in front of her new family and shot her twice, including once in the head.

**An Uncertain Future**

Noah and Robert lost touch when he was 13, mostly owing to Abel's disapproval of the relationship. **A decade passed before Noah finally tracked his father down and reunited.** All of the doubt and distance Noah felt about his father disappeared the first time he saw Robert again. By now, Noah's career had taken off, and Robert had been following his son's progression the whole time. He was...

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**Born a Crime Summary Part 1 | Chapter 1: The Consequences of Apartheid**

**A Little History**

Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racism in South Africa. It began in 1948 and lasted for 46 years. The laws delineated different rights to citizens based on race, with the white race reigning supreme.

Apartheid was efficiently executed. It first developed as a result of colonial intrusion, which started in the mid-17th century. The Dutch arrived first and established a trading post in what would become Cape Town. They warred with the native blacks to attain power and instituted laws to enforce it, including enslaving them.

When British missionaries arrived, they displaced the Dutch to remote areas inland. Slavery was legally dissolved, but the practice remained. The British needed people to mine discovered gold and diamond supplies. After some time, the missionaries left South Africa, and the Dutch moved back in and reclaimed power.

By that time, the Dutch had developed their own culture and language, calling themselves Afrikaners, a tribe of white Africans. They wanted a way to maintain control over the expansive black population, so they created a new set of laws, which became apartheid. These laws were based on research conducted on other forms of legal racism around the world.

The newfound intricate system of oppression comprised 3,000 pages. **Blacks were to have no rights and be constantly monitored and controlled.** At its core, apartheid was like a combination of the Indian massacres, slavery, and Jim Crow in America.
All people were required to register as a specific race with the government. This registration determined what rights you had and where you lived. Land became parcelled based on race to keep people separated from one another.

**Tensions within the Black Community**

Apartheid was also used to breed separation within the black community. These efforts kept the black population, almost five times larger than the white population, in a state of disunity to create a contentious environment.

Before apartheid, blacks lived within different tribes, each with their own language; the two...

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**Born a Crime Summary Chapter 2: A Mixed Child Born a Crime**

Noah's birth was a crime under the laws of apartheid. Blacks and other races were not allowed to have relations with whites, and vice versa. The narrative under which apartheid existed was that blacks were fundamentally inferior and whites had no desire to engage with them, hence the segregation. Therefore, a child born as a product of racial mixing served to debunk the theories upholding apartheid. Because of this, a mixed child became a symbol of treason.

The government made the no-relations law the priority, strictly enforcing it through secret surveillance tactics. The punishment for interracial relations was five years in prison. However, often the white partner would be given a mere warning, whereas the black partner would be jailed or charged with rape if he was male.

A mixed child was not a new phenomenon during apartheid. In fact, there were plenty of mixed-race people by the time apartheid started. These people had historically been classified as a separate race: colored.

**The Colored Race**

The history of the colored race extends to the origins of South Africa. The Khoisan were the original tribe in South Africa, similar to Native Americans. When the colonials first came, along with the land, they ravaged the Khoisan women. Those women gave birth to mixed children as a result.

Other slaves were brought in from surrounding regions and procreated with the Khoisan people, further decreasing the bloodline. The original tribe was becoming extinct, either through war and slaughter or inter-tribe relations.

The combination of generations of people descending from the Khoisan created a race of diverse heritages and racial make-ups. Because many were descendants of white men, they tended toward white culture.

Most coloreds speak Afrikaans and don’t know other African languages. Almost all aspects of the colored culture come from the Dutch Afrikaners.

The plight of the colored race during apartheid is a messy one. The government didn’t know how to classify colored people. To mitigate this, **coloreds were granted...**

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**Born a Crime Summary Chapter 3: The Son of God**

Much of Noah's life existed in a world where women ruled. The house in Soweto was all women: his aunt, whose husband lived there but was inconsequential; his grandmother; and his great-grandmother, Koko. Koko was frail and blind. She would sit by the stove all day and take in the activities. She was alert and mentally sound, but she couldn't see or move around. Noah had a hard time thinking of her as a person because she seemed more like a statue who sometimes spoke.

Growing up with women was not unique to Noah's life. Apartheid took his father because he was white, but the other black kids were often without fathers, too. Apartheid had taken their fathers to labor jobs far away or prison. Some fathers were in exile fighting against the laws.

The space that would typically be occupied by men was replaced with religion. **Life for his family and all other women in the**
neighborhood centered around faith. They held daily prayer meetings at each other's homes. His grandmother hosted the meetings on Tuesday nights.

Noah loved these nights because he loved to sing the hymns and pray. His grandmother told Noah his prayers were the most powerful because he prayed in English, the language of God. She always asked him to pray for everyone in the group, and Noah took pride in his ability to reach God and help others.

Who Will Pray for Trevor?
The belief in the power of Noah's prayers created a sticky situation for Noah one night.

In Soweto, every citizen had been given a tiny parcel of land and meager supplies to build a dwelling. Most started with a shack. Then, after saving up a little money, they might add a room or a garage. Noah's grandmother's house had reached that level, with two rooms total. The kitchen was in one room, and everyone slept in the other. But there was no indoor plumbing, and six or seven houses shared an outhouse, which was really just a seat over a hole in the ground. They used newspaper as toilet paper.

Noah never enjoyed this arrangement, especially when he had serious business to do in the bathroom, because...

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Born a Crime Summary Chapter 4: Learning to Fit In

Being mixed in a black family was basically the same as being white for Noah. He wasn't punished by his grandmother like his black cousins were. He was treated more leniently, being let off for bad behavior that was much worse than what his cousins were being beaten for.

Growing up this way helped him understand why whites are quick to hold onto their privilege. He never argued with his special treatment. He would rather allow his cousins to be punished for his misdeeds than take the beatings himself.

But as a small child, Noah didn't understand that his skin color was the cause of the special treatment. He thought of color as types of chocolate, just different flavors of the same thing. His flavor was simply the combination of dark and white chocolate. He was milk chocolate. When other blacks referred to him as white or treated him as such, he just thought they didn't know much about colors. He thought his special treatment was specific to who he was. It was a "Trevor" thing, not a "race" thing.

His lack of understanding was compounded by the fact that there were no other people who looked like him as a point of reference. In Soweto, with a population of nearly one million people, Noah was the only mixed person for miles. In fact, after apartheid ended and he could venture outdoors, his grandmother's neighbors started using him as a landmark: "Take a right at the light-skinned boy."

Kids would point at him like a spectacle. Some tried to feel what his skin felt like. Others ran away from him. The other children had rarely seen a white person and didn't know the difference. They didn't have TV, never left the township, and police didn't count.

The Boy of Many Languages

Another way apartheid created discord in the black community was through language. There were many tribes and languages spoken in Soweto. During apartheid, members of certain tribes were only allowed to learn that tribe's language. Zulu kids learned Zulu, Xhosa kids Xhosa, and so on. Therefore, different groups of blacks believed they were different because they...
Born a Crime Summary Chapter 5: The Power of a Mother’s Love

Before apartheid, blacks were educated by the British missionaries, who wanted to Westernize the natives. Later, many of these people became leaders in the anti-apartheid movement because they were intelligent and well-educated.

However, during apartheid, the Afrikaners didn’t want blacks to be educated. They created separate educational systems called Bantu schools, in which the teachers were barely educated themselves. These schools didn’t teach science, history, or social studies. Blacks were taught only enough math to understand how to count during farm labor and other trade knowledge. Often, these lessons were taught like nursery rhymes, even to the older students.

More than just ensuring that blacks would not be able to think and organize, the Afrikaners claimed there was no reason to educate a black person. Knowledge would not be needed in their lives. Former missionary schools were forced to change or close. Many chose the latter.

But Patricia would make sure Noah would not suffer this fate. Properly educating him in knowledge and life experience became her priority.

Lower-Lower-Class Citizen

Patricia, like Noah, never felt a true sense of belonging growing up. When she had Noah, she did so with a desire to love someone who would love her back. Someone who belonged to her.

She was a troublemaker as a child, already stubborn, and rebellious. Her mother didn’t think Patricia acted like a girl should act.

As neither the eldest daughter nor a son who would carry on the family name, she wasn’t significant in her family structure. She and her mother were always at odds, but she loved her father. Her father was named Temperance, which was contrary to his gregarious personality. He was eccentric and flashy, but later, they discovered he was actually bipolar. He lived with a second family, and when he’d visit, Patricia would follow him on his manic escapades.

When Patricia was nine, she requested to live with her father. Her mother complied, but instead of taking her in, her father sent her to live with his sister in...
Extinguisher in the school piano so it would explode with foam when played at an assembly.

Yet, his favorite forms of mischief involved knives and fire. His mother once bought a bunch of fireworks for Guy Fawkes Day, and he emptied the contents into a pile. But he accidentally ignited the pile with one of the other fireworks and burned off his eyebrows and part of his hair.

The view from the outside was that Noah was mischievous, destructive, and wild. However, Noah says he did what he did because he liked to create and experiment. His motivation was a desire to see what reaction his actions could create, not to destroy.

Because of his behavior, Noah and his mother had a relationship akin to a detective and their target in films: a bitter rivalry but a high regard for each other’s...

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 7: The Most Important Lesson a Dog Can Teach

After they moved into the house in Eden Park, Patricia brought home two black cats she got from a woman at work. Noah had never had pets and was excited, and Patricia loved animals. Although Patricia was well aware that black people hated cats, believing they were witches, she thought things might be different in a colored neighborhood. She was wrong.

One day, she and Noah came home to find the cats strung up and mutilated, with the Afrikaan word for witch written on the front wall. Noah took it in stride, seeing how the cats never became affectionate with him. But when they replaced the cats with two dogs, he was excited. They named the dogs Fufi and Panther.

Panther took to Patricia and Fufi to Noah. Panther was bright, but Fufi was not. (They didn't realize Fufi was deaf until after she was killed by a burglar and the doctor told them.)

Noah loved Fufi more than anything. He trained her, slept with her, and taught her tricks. Fufi could jump so high, she could jump above his head. Noah and Patricia started coming home to Fufi waiting outside the gate of their house. They never understood how she got out.

Then, Noah stayed home from school one day and discovered Fufi's secret. Fufi would wait until they had left, then jump to the top of the five-foot wall and scramble over. Noah followed Fufi and saw her jump the wall into another yard. When he asked the boy who lived there if he could get this dog from the yard, the boy said Fufi was his dog. Noah tried to call to Fufi, but she couldn't hear him and didn't know her name. Of course, Noah didn't know this.

Noah was heartbroken that Fufi ignored his pleas, but he was especially upset to see her with another boy. When Patricia got home, he cried and told her the whole story. Patricia took Noah to the house to get Fufi back, but the mother lied and said Fufi was theirs. Even after Patricia showed her a picture and...

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 8: Father and Son Reunion

There is so much Noah doesn't know about his father, even now. He doesn't know anything about Robert's extended family or what his life was like before Patricia. What he does know is that his father was a chef in Canada and New York, then opened some bars and restaurants in South Africa, but that's it. But thanks to Patricia's insistence, he's been able to learn a little about Robert as a person.

When Noah was 24, Patricia encouraged him to find Robert. Noah hadn't seen him for 10 years and never thought he would again. Noah didn't see the big deal. He'd grown up, started his career, and was happy. But she said it was important for Noah to show Robert who he'd become and learn about him. She didn't want Noah going through life believing his father didn't care about him, something that may not be true.
Understanding Robert

Noah attributes his father's private nature to his parents' ability to get away with a mixed child during apartheid. Where Patricia was feisty, Robert was reserved. Noah believes he is the confluence of both.

Robert hated racism and homogeneity of any kind. This feeling wasn't one of moral superiority, but rather a lack of understanding about why apartheid existed. Robert couldn't rationalize why white people would come to Africa if they didn't like black people. Therefore, because the laws were illogical, he never lived by them.

Robert opened the first integrated restaurants in Johannesburg during apartheid through a special license to serve black people. The licenses were distributed by the government out of necessity. Visiting black dignitaries and tourists from other countries were not subject to the laws of apartheid, so they had to make special cases to accommodate them. Black South Africans with money exploited this loophole by frequenting establishments with licenses.

The restaurant was a success. White people were curious about black people, and black people were curious about what the white people were curious about. This common intrigue outweighed the boundaries they were supposed to uphold. But...

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Born a Crime Summary Part II | Chapter 9: No Race To Call His Own

Noah was a boy without an island, so to speak. He was mixed, which made him appear to be colored. But because the colored race was a cultural distinction more than a representation of a specific race, Noah didn't belong with them either.

There was also a lot of tension between blacks and coloreds. As stated, coloreds were treated as “almost white” in the eyes of the law. But a colored person could rise to the status of white during their lifetime if they started to show white traits. Their hair might become straighter or skin lighter. The decision to reclassify involved a number of factors, and some would have to undergo the “pencil test.” A pencil would be placed in their hair. If the pencil fell out, they were white. If not, they were colored.

The government made sure colored people were aware of the reason they couldn't have full rights. There was a fear that some
blacks would pretend to be colored to skirt the system. Thus, blacks were to blame for the fate of the colored. The most damning thing you could call a colored person was "bushman" because it drew attention to their black heritage.

The Breaking Point

All of these factors created problems for Noah with colored people in Eden Park. He looked like them, but he was culturally black. Some colored people considered him a disgrace for adapting to the inferior black race. Others thought him a snob because he had a white father and spoke English, not Afrikaans. There was no middle. He couldn't win.

Despite Eden Park being a colored community, Noah says his time there was the hardest of his childhood. He wrote, "It is easier to be an insider as an outsider than to be an outsider as an insider."

Eden Park was a lonely place for Noah. He had no friends and was bullied often. He was so desperate for friends, he often walked into a bully's trap willingly, thinking their kindness was sincere. He became used to the bullying and didn't let it bother him, but the day at the mulberry tree pushed him over the edge.

The Consequences of Bullying

There was a large mulberry...

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 10: The Entrepreneur

Noah started eighth grade at Sandringham High School, a school mixed with different races and run like a charter school in America. The school was large and represented every race of South Africa, serving as a sort of model of how the country at large could or should be.

Despite the diverse student body, Noah found himself again on the outside of the different groups. The cliques, more often than not, comprised mostly one race. However, this breakdown had more to do with class structure, geography, and activity interests than race. Kids from the suburbs hung out with other kids from the suburbs, and the same was true for kids from townships. Athletes hung out with athletes, computer enthusiasts the same, and so on. Certain social classes or races of students were more likely to play certain sports or have interests in certain clubs.

Noah didn't fit into any of these groups. He mostly hung out with the poor black students, but he never got to see them outside of school. He didn't ride their buses to the townships and couldn't hang out with them on weekends because Patricia never had enough money for gas. Whenever school was not in session, Noah was alone.

Noah's family didn't live close to the school, so his walk was long, which meant he was always late and, consequently, getting detention. During each day's assembly, his name was always on the detention list announced to the student body. He was so famous as the detention kid that when his name wasn't announced one day, everyone cheered.

Finding His Niche

After the assembly was lunch, and most everyone got snacks and food from the tuck shop, a market stand. Noah was a fast runner, and he'd always be the first to make it to the tuck shop. Being first in line was a big deal. The sooner you were able to get food, the sooner you could eat, and the rest of the lunch break would be free time. There was also the chance that the tuck shop would run out of food....

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 11: The Benefits of Being Mixed

For a period of time, Noah and his family were more or less homeless. They'd left Eden Park, and everything they had went into helping Abel build his mechanic business. But after a while, Patricia bought a run-down house in a white suburban neighborhood called Highland North.
Highland North was mostly working-class or middle-class Jews. As the only black kid there, Noah once again stood out.

Making friends in this neighborhood was even harder than in Eden Park because of how the neighborhood was designed. Fear of blacks during apartheid had caused most white families to build tall walls around their houses with electric wire on top. Everyone was isolated from each other, and Noah could often ride his bike through the neighborhood and never see a kid.

Noah soon found that the best way to make friends in the white neighborhood was to befriend the children of the help. Servants who lived in backyard quarters of their white employees could keep their children with them. These kids became Noah's only friends.

**Two Peas in a Pod**

One of these friends was a boy named Teddy, who went to Noah's high school. Teddy's mother was a domestic worker in a white neighborhood a few miles away.

Noah and Teddy were fast friends and became inseparable. Teddy also had a penchant for mischief, and Noah finally felt normal for the first time. Together, they walked all over Johannesburg getting into trouble.

One of their frequent excursions was to the local mall on Friday and Saturday nights. They'd wander around because they couldn't afford to buy anything. The mall had a movie theater and would stay open late, even after the stores were closed.

One night, Teddy and Noah discovered they could stick their arms through the gate of one of the stores and steal chocolates filled with alcohol. Stealing these chocolates became the routine. For weeks, they'd reach in, grab some chocolates, drink the contents, and go back for more.

**Caught in the Act**

One night, a security guard caught Noah with his arm through the gate. Both boys took off running, and a chase...

**Born a Crime Summary Chapter 12: Girls**

Patricia frequently talked to Noah about women. But her comments were always about grown-up relationships. She taught him what it meant to be a man and how to respect a woman. But she never taught him how to navigate puberty and girls his own age. Noah would have to learn those lessons on his own.

**The First Love**

After he moved from Catholic school to the government school, Noah found himself on the cusp of Valentine's Day having no idea what it was. Catholic schools didn't celebrate Valentine's Day. When he found out what Valentine's Day was, he thought it was bizarre. But he still wanted to be part of it.

His friend suggested Noah make a girl named Maylene his valentine. Maylene was colored, the only colored girl in the school. She and Noah looked the same, so people thought they should be together.

Noah already knew Maylene. When he still lived in Eden Park, they had walked home together from school. But Patricia and Abel had gotten married and had a son, Andrew. They'd moved out of their old neighborhood.

Noah liked Maylene, not romantically, but he thought she was smart and cute. If his friend hadn't suggested her as a valentine, the thought never would have occurred to him. But Noah was motivated by his friend's assurance that Maylene liked him, something he'd never experienced, so he asked how to make it happen.

Noah got a crash course in the mating rituals of adolescents. It was the typical "have your friends talk to her friends and work it out" scenario. Her friends gave his friends the green light, and Noah asked Maylene out after school one day. She said yes and gave him his first kiss.

Noah was over the moon. Not only did he have a valentine, but he had his first girlfriend. He wanted to make Valentine's Day special. He saved his money and bought flowers, a card, and a stuffed bear. He even wrote a poem in the card using Maylene's...
name. When the anticipated day came, Noah took his gifts and waited for Maylene to come out of class.

Standing alone in the hallway, Noah watched other couples exchanging gifts and becoming giddy...

Born a Crime Summary Part III | Chapter 13: The Big Man on Campus

Before Noah expanded his own enterprise to include pirated CDs, he sold them for a white student two years older named Andrew. The two met after Noah overheard Andrew complaining about being ripped off by the black students. The black students would buy items on credit and never pay. He was too afraid to collect.

Noah offered to partner up and manage the black students for a fee. Around this time, Noah also convinced Patricia to buy him a computer for school work. At first, he just wanted to play video games. But Andrew was a whiz at computers, and he helped Noah improve his with more memory and features and taught him how to download music.

Noah worked for Andrew for a year. When it came time for Andrew to graduate, he gave Noah his CD burner to keep the business going. Suddenly, Noah had everything he needed to go into business by himself.

Noah was a natural at the bootleg game. He was good at selling and had a product that was a hot commodity. **CD burners were expensive and uncommon, so Noah had a monopoly on the pirated-CD market.**

Part of what helped Noah's business was that he catered to everyone's tastes. He still didn't know about popular music because it wasn't allowed in the house, and he didn't listen to music when he was downloading it. He was able to amass a large variety of music without bias.

One day, Noah's employee Bongani gave him the idea of making CDs with only the best tracks of different albums, rather than whole albums. So, Noah started selling mixed CDs, which was a boon for business. Bongani had another idea: make the tracks fade in and out so the momentum of the beat wasn't lost between songs. Again, Noah listened, and his party mixes were a hit.

Noah was making hand over fist with these new products. **At one point, he was making 500 rand a week, which is more than...**

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 14: A Career in Bloom

Bongani was from a small ghetto named Alexandra, a black area left over from pre-apartheid. It is known as Gomorrah for its wild parties and rampant crime.

The township of Alexandra was once a white-owned farm. It was a place where black squatters lived when coming to find work in the city before apartheid. The white owner had sold plots of land to some of the black tenants before apartheid made it illegal for blacks to own land. Whereas in other similar areas, blacks were moved out and the land was turned into white suburbs, the blacks in Alexandra refused to give up their land.

**The government built wealthy white neighborhoods around Alexandra, but the residents still wouldn’t leave.** Unlike Soweto, where there was room for the town to expand after apartheid, Alexandra was boxed in. It was a dense, rundown area with shacks squeezed in like sardines.

When Bongani asked Noah if he wanted to go to the hood the summer after high school, Noah wasn’t sure. He’d only been to Alexandra a few times, and never at night. During apartheid, the hoods were the places no one wanted to be from. **You were supposed to be ashamed of being from a township.**

But as apartheid ended, American gangster rap and hip-hop were growing in popularity. Suddenly, thanks to films and music about South Central LA, the hood was increasing in its status. South African kids in the townships took this street cred and started owning it with pride. All of this made Noah intrigued, so he went with Bongani.

Noah had never experienced any place like it. There was a constant hum of human commotion. People were everywhere, walking...
around, hanging on the corners, or hustling this or that. The town was mostly cinder block and iron. There was no sanitation, so people were always burning garbage. Noah thought it was overwhelming. But he also saw there was structure amid the pandemonium. Certain streets held higher social clout than others.

Bongani lived on the other side of the river that ran through town in the only area the government had paid any attention to. There were actual houses on this...

**Born a Crime Summary Chapter 15: A Life of Crime**

Life in the hood is one of survival for most people. The need to survive often leads to many shades of illegal activity. The lines between good and bad become blurred.

Even if a person wasn't outright stealing, likely they were buying something from someone else that was originally stolen one, two, or three exchanges before. It could be as simple as a mother buying a box of canned goods that “fell” off a delivery truck to feed her hungry children. Crime is just a part of life.

Everyone grew up together in the hood and knew each other. Even the gangsters were members of the community. Everyone in the hood looked out for each other. An example of this close-knit community is the mom code. There was an unspoken rule that if a mom asked you to do something, you did it, gangster or not.

**The Hustle**

Noah's career as a criminal had originally started with the pirated CDs. But he never thought what he was doing was a crime. If you weren't supposed to download music and burn CDs, why would they make it possible?

He and his crew were doing good business with the CDs and DJing gigs. Minibus drivers were their best customers. Because of the competition among them, the drivers were always looking for new music. They'd drive by Bongani's corner, place an order, complete their route, and come back to pick up the CD.

Bongani, always the visionary, saw how they could extend their hustle. He posited that a series of minor deals could create a scenario in which the deals stacked up to lead to the biggest score. They started small, such as allowing the minibus drivers to pay for CDs on credit. The drivers would take the CDs and promise to pay at the end of the week. The boys would attach a small interest rate to the debt.

This venture started bringing extra cash, a commodity in the hood. People always needed needed cash in Alexandra. Bongani realized they could give people small loans for a bill or food and add a little interest on the backend. Once they started doing this, they were doubling, then tripling their money.

The business expanded beyond loans....

**Born a Crime Summary Chapter 16: The Hardest Lesson**

Patricia never liked that Noah hung out in Alexandra. She didn't have a problem with the people in the hood, just the way of life in the hood. She wanted Noah to be somewhere where progress happened, knowing he was the kind of person who would excel just to make sure others didn't surpass him.

During his time in Alexandra, Patricia never stopped worrying that he would get arrested and throw his potential away. She told Noah if he ever got arrested, not to call her. He would have to learn his lesson the hard way.

**When You Look for Trouble, Trouble Finds You**

When he and Bongani were still in business, Noah saw an ad for some cell phones on the cheap that they could flip for a nice
profit. He needed to drive into Johannesburg, so he took the old Mazda he'd taken to the matric dance from Abel's garage. This behavior was nothing new. He'd been doing it for years and often got into trouble. But despite his mother's punishment, he'd do it again.

The car, like many of the cars in Abel's yard, wasn't properly registered and didn't have plates. But Abel kept a stack of old plates around, and Noah took one of those and put it on the car. He was nineteen or twenty and didn't think twice about it.

He didn't make it far before he was pulled over in Hillbrow. He knew he was being racially profiled, but he was in an illegal car, so he tried to play it cool. When the cop started asking him questions about the car, he was anything but cool. He froze up.

Being black in South Africa means being used to the law always sniffing around. In that moment, Noah wasn't afraid of the law as much as he was of what his mother would say when she found out.

It wasn't until the cop ran the random, expired plates that Noah realized he was in serious trouble. He was handcuffed and arrested for suspicion of driving a stolen car. He was taken in, processed, and fingerprinted.

The situation went from bad to worse when the cops tried to locate the vehicle's owner. When Noah stole a car from Abel, he always stole the junk cars, never a client's car. If he'd taken...

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 17: The Good Mother

Noah and his mother had always been a team. They argued, they fought, but there was always love between them, even when Patricia teased him about his looks. For instance, after the matric dance, Noah kept getting his hair relaxed and braided. Patricia teased him about putting so much effort into his appearance. But on Sundays, she'd dress to the nines for church. She'd tease Noah that he wasn't the prettiest one in the house anymore.

Noah couldn't help but agree. He saw his mom as a beautiful, strong woman, inside and out. But as he got older, a wedge would form in their relationship. This wedge was named Abel.

A New Member of the Team

After Patricia met Abel at the garage where she took the Beetle, she and Noah would visit him often. Noah was six and didn't understand adult behavior, but he knew this man was suddenly part of their lives.

Abel was tall, with strong arms and large hands. He was moderately handsome, funny, and charismatic. He always helped whoever was in need. The world knew him as a good man. But at home, he was abusive.

At first, Abel was just Patricia's cool friend they sometimes hung out with. But after the fire, when Abel moved into their Eden Park home, their lives changed forever.

When Patricia told Noah she was marrying Abel, he tried to talk her out of it. He wasn't angry or jealous. He just had an inclination that Abel was bad news. Noah had seen Abel's fury the night at the mulberry tree when he beat up a child, and it hadn't surprised him a bit. Furthermore, Abel's name held the answer to his character. His Tsonga name was Ngisaveni, which meant "be afraid."

The Wolf at the Table

After a year of marriage, Patricia gave birth to Andrew. Abel took the family to his parent's house over Christmas in the Tsonga homeland of Tzaneen. Abel's family was traditional, believing in stereotypical gender roles, in which women were subservient.

Patricia hated the customs. She didn't believe in bowing to men (which was something women literally did) and made a mockery out of bowing when called upon.

In...
Born a Crime Summary Chapter 18: From Abuse to Attempted Murder

Patricia eventually moved into her own bedroom for a year or two. Noah was counting the days until Andrew was eighteen and would leave home. He wanted his mother to be free to leave Abel once and for all. But when Andrew was nine, she became pregnant again.

Physically, this pregnancy should never have happened. Patricia's tubes were tied after Andrew, and she was middle-aged. Not even the doctors knew what to say. But Patricia saw it as a sign from God. God wanted her to bring more decent men into the world. She seemed regretful of her new predicament, but she was determined to make it work.

Noah, on the other hand, saw that she would forever be stuck in that house with Abel. When the new baby, Isaac, was born, Noah retreated from the family. He didn't visit often. Then, another event would make him stay away for good.

Noah had gone over to the house for a visit and found police cars out front. Patricia had intervened when Abel was fighting with one of his workers, and Abel used Andrew's bicycle to beat her. As always, the police acted like old chums with Abel, and nothing happened.

After that incident, Patricia hired people from work to build her a small dwelling in the backyard, where she started living with Isaac. Noah was incredulous, but she told him it was the only power she had. No one was going to help her, but she would make sure Abel was shamed by a wife living in the backyard instead of with him.

Noah stopped calling and visiting. As much as he hated Abel, his anger was directed more at Patricia. He blamed her for staying and choosing to be abused. He was too young to understand domestic violence or how it affects people. He didn't understand relationships at all.

Noah didn't realize the predicament Patricia was in. Abuse was part of life for African women. No one stepped in, not even the police. What was she supposed to do with children from different fathers in a male-driven society that refused to acknowledge her suffering?

The last time Noah fought with her about Abel, **she told him if she tried to leave, he would kill...**

Born a Crime Summary Chapter 19: The Aftermath

After Andrew drove off with Patricia, Abel had taken Isaac. Isaac asked him why he'd killed mommy, to which Abel said he was unhappy and sad. Abel dropped Isaac off at a friend's house after telling Isaac he was going to kill himself.

Abel went around to all of his friends and relatives and told them what he did and what he was going to do. Toward the end of the day, a family member told him he was a coward and to turn himself in. Abel turned over the gun and went to the police.

Noah tried to block Abel's bail, but because the police had never agreed to press charges, he had no priors. And Abel claimed he needed to take care of his sons, so he was released.

The trial dragged on. Patricia's injuries changed the severity of the charge, and he was only accused of attempted murder. Abel took a plea deal and spent no time in jail. He got to maintain joint custody of his sons.

Abel still lives somewhere in Johannesburg, not too far from Patricia.

Patricia's side of the story was the most significant. She remembered everything that happened up to starting the car. She said when Abel pointed the gun at her head, she started to pray.

**Nobody has ever been able to explain...**
Shortform Exercise: Reflect on Born a Crime

Trevor Noah’s life is certainly unique, but there are universal elements to his story.

What aspects of Noah’s story resonated with you the most?

SIGN UP FOR FULL EXERCISE