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# Growing up with Apartheid.
## A Reader's Note on

**NOAH, Trevor. 2017. Born a Crime. Stories from a South African Childhood. New York: Spiegel & Grau. 304 pp. ISBN: 978-0-525-50902-8**

*by Dominik Spörker*[1]

Trevor Noah is a South African comedian and writer, who became the host of "The Daily Show", a New York-based late night comedy show, in 2015. Asked about his childhood in interviews, Noah would often say that he was "born a crime"– a phrase that he used for the title of his autobiography. It refers to the circumstances of his birth in Johannesburg back in 1984. His mother Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, a Xhosa woman, decided in some kind of a rebellious act, as the author calls it, to have a child with an acquaintance of hers called Robert. Robert was a white Swiss-German living in South Africa, who didn't care about the racial segregation laws of the apartheid regime and agreed.

A very central topic of the autobiography is Trevor Noah's relation with his mother. She is the key figure in his life, and the book can also be read as an homage to her. He pictures her as a very religious person, a fearless rebel and a strict disciplinarian, but also as an exceptionally caring and devoted mother, who spent all her money on his education.

Apartheid meant for Trevor Noah to largely grow up without a father, because the laws of apartheid didn't allow him to see Robert on a regular basis. However, this was a common case in South Africa, not only for 'mixed-race' children, but also for most of the other black children in the townships. Black workers were needed on farms and mines in the countryside, so most of the black male adults spent nearly the whole year away from their family, to work for abysmal wages. Another large number

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of males had to spend their time in prison or exile, either because they resisted the government or because they relied on illegal ways of income and got caught by the state authorities. That is why Trevor Noah puts a strong emphasis on the leading role of women in the resistance against apartheid: since men were mostly absent, women had to keep the different groups and organisations together. "As a nation, we recognized the power of women, but in the home they were expected to submit and obey" (39), recollects the author in chapter 3 and points out the difference between public opinions and private habits regarding gender roles.

Another crucial topic in the book is domestic violence and the ignorance of the police regarding that matter. Being a nasty, hyperactive kid, who loved to play with fire and causing much trouble, he often got spanked by his mother. But that is not a big issue to Trevor Noah. With his stepfather Abel, the issue was different. Abel was hot-tempered and especially Trevor's mother suffered under his violent behaviour. His stepfather's alcoholism additionally exacerbated the situation. According to Noah, alcoholism was a problem in the townships in general, as there were many shebeens and beer halls - where workers tended to spend all their little income. Although Patricia filed many complaints about domestic violence, the police didn't take the matter serious. When the situation escalated Abel wasn't sent to prison because all the prior complaints had not been properly processed by the police.

Being neither black nor white Trevor Noah had to find a way to fit in. The government labelled him 'coloured', but the coloured kids in school rejected him, because he didn't speak like them. By then, he had discovered how languages shape identity and culture. Like many South Africans, he had grown up to becoming a polyglot. However, unlike many other Africans he had – beside the Bantu languages Sotho, Tsonga, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu - also learned Afrikaans, English and German. At the schoolyard, he seemed to fit into of the 'racial' groups looming there. Although Trevor Noah regarded himself as black, he was not acknowledged by the black kids because his skin was 'too light'. He had to find a way to get accepted. So he started to sell food from a food truck as well as pirated CDs he replicated at home. His multilingualism enabled him to shift from one group to another, and which child, after all, would not become friends with the person selling sweets and the latest music hits? Noah became a chameleon at the

schoolyard, changing his identity by switching languages and gaining acceptance by offering access to popular goods (52ff.).

The history of the Republic of South Africa is shaped by the perpetual efforts of a (white) minority to gain and maintain the political and economic control of a complex society. In order to achieve that, the apartheid government divided all 'non-whites' in various groups and subgroups and each of these groups were given different rights and privileges to keep them divided. Because a 'mixed' child was not supposed to exist at all, Patricia Noah had to navigate herself and her 'illegal' son through a society built upon institutionalized racism. She bid defiance to the system and had to find loopholes so as not to be arrested. Trevor Noah argues that "[…] race mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent." (21)

In my opinion, Noah's intention is not to show us how terrible apartheid was for "non-white" people (which, of course it was), but instead he is focusing on the opportunities that the oppressed and discriminated people of South Africa created for themselves. He aims at empowerment. After finishing school, Noah couldn't afford the fees to go to university. Most of his classmates, who had a wealthier background, took a year off to travel. He himself also decided to take a year off and make some money. As he couldn't find a decent job, Trevor Noah decided to continue his music business with his friends. Therefore, they spent most of their time in the township Alexandria, where the boys sold pirated CDs, hustled and lent money to the residents of the township. Because they already had access to a vast amount of music and the necessary electronical equipment, they started to host (illegal) block parties and dance battles to promote their business and to introduce the latest hits. Back then Noah didn't consider selling stolen music a crime, for him and his gang it was just another way to make money. They downloaded the music because they had access to a computer and sold it mostly to bus drivers and students. It was their own business; they found a niche for themselves.

As a child, Noah spent a lot of his time with his grandmother, who lived in Soweto. Technically, he was not allowed to be there, because he wasn't black, but his family somehow managed to hide him inside the house and its backyard. Soweto was, in the broadest sense, a prison for black people. In the township barely any infrastructure existed but nearly every house had its own driveway - although no one could afford a car. Yet, the author

points out how people used the townships for self-determination by summing up: “The story of Soweto is the story of driveways. It’s a hopeful place.” (42) In my opinion this uplifting tone of his descriptions is one of the most outstanding aspects of the book.

Mentioning South Africa, the name Nelson Mandela comes to mind. Trevor Noah was five years old, when Nelson Mandela walked free. Although the end of apartheid implied a lot of changes in South Africa and Nelson Mandela was among the leading figures at that time, the author doesn’t really deal with South Africa's first black president his autobiography. And he doesn’t need to. The changing environment in the post-apartheid state, the struggle for power, the violence in the streets and the way the government worked or failed to work seem to have been more important to him. If you want to hear something about Nelson Mandela by Trevor Noah, you should rather watch his comedy specials on *Netflix*. On the other hand, if you have seen a lot of his TV-shows, some parts of the book will sound very familiar and might seem repetitive. Nevertheless, there are many interesting and also delightful stories, which make it worth reading.

The book itself is divided in three parts, which arrange the different chapters in a chronological order. Trevor Noah as a child is Part I. The second part is about him as a teenager, and the topic of Part III is his life as a young adult. The chapters themselves, however, are not organized chronologically. They pop up like memories, circling around different topics such as religion, education, crime, love, relationships and violence. Every chapter is introduced by a short abstract, which should prepare the reader with necessary context, e.g. cultural differences, giving historical facts or the authors’ family background.

To sum up, the book is a combination of Trevor Noah’s childhood memories and reflections of the author about his growing up under the apartheid regime and then the post-apartheid state of South Africa. It offers helpful insights into how the apartheid-regime worked and where it failed seen from Trevor Noah’s specific perspective as a person of colour who did not fit any of the apartheid categories making him a fine observer – more attentive, perhaps, than most persons of the same age. With the end of apartheid things didn’t get better immediately, and Noah reminds the readers that the struggle for power between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party was quite violent. Oversimplifying the processes after the fall of the apartheid regime, Noah describes the street

blockades and riots of that time in terms of a proxy war between the Zulu and Xhosa (12).

The book is interesting and diverting to read because the author has an entertaining style of writing and a grim sense of humour. A warning, however, seems appropriate: the reader should not expect a historical sketch of apartheid or an ode to Nelson Mandela. Trevor Noah's autobiography is humorous in many ways. He was a real prankster as a child and his mother chased him through the whole township to punish him: "We had a very Tom and Jerry relationship, me and my mom." (11) With a lot of situational humour, Trevor Noah also points out the agency of those South Africans who were labelled as 'non-white' by the government. Despite all the humour, the book does not lack the necessary seriousness on sensitive topics, which makes it an essential reading even, perhaps, for those interested in South Africa`s recent history of everyday life in a particular perspective from below.