

Lesson

Negotiating Belonging in Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*

Overview**About This Lesson**

Building on their work with Misa Sugiura's short story "Where I'm From," in this lesson, students will read a chapter from the young readers' adapted edition of Trevor Noah's memoir *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime, Stories from a South African Childhood*. Growing up in Soweto under apartheid as the child of a Black mother and white father, Noah used language—Xhosa, English, Zulu, and Afrikaans—to cultivate his own sense of belonging in the segregated spaces he navigated in his neighborhood and schools.

To help students consider the relationship between identity and belonging, they will create identity charts for Trevor Noah and then do a close-reading activity with passages from the text that help them address the lesson's guiding questions and draw connections to earlier lessons about values. Ultimately, this story is one of agency, in which a young Trevor Noah aligns his decisions to his personal values in order to create spaces where he feels a deep sense of belonging.

Essential Questions

- What are the forces that shape belonging?
- How can we reduce barriers to belonging for ourselves and others?

Guiding Questions

- In what ways can cultural, linguistic, and racial boundaries influence characters' experiences of belonging?
- What steps can individuals take to find belonging in the spaces they occupy?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

In order to deepen their understanding of the text, themselves, each other, and the world, students will . . .

- Examine the many factors that can shape an individual's identity.

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- Engage with real and imagined stories that help them understand their own experiences and how others experience the world.
- Critically and ethically analyze thematic development and literary craft in order to draw connections between the text and their lives.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Access materials and a lesson Plan-on-a-Page in this [Google Folder](#).

- **Slides:** A Brief History of South Africa during Apartheid
- **Reading:** "Chameleon" from *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime*
- **Handout:** Notable Quotable Passages from "Chameleon" by Trevor Noah

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Providing Historical Context for South Africa during Apartheid

Your students may not be familiar with South African history during apartheid, a policy of racial segregation and discrimination that lasted from the 1940s to the early 1990s. Trevor Noah was born in 1984 to a Black mother and a white father and grew up with his mother's family in a township called Soweto, outside of Johannesburg. At that time, interracial dating, marriage, and sexual relations were illegal in South Africa—hence the title of Noah's memoir, *Born a Crime*.

The first activity in this lesson includes a slide deck with a brief historical overview and teacher talking points to help students understand the historical context in which Trevor Noah came of age. **It is especially important that before encountering the main text in this lesson, your students understand that race in South Africa has a different social construction than in the United States, so please do not skip this activity.**

You can deepen your own understanding of this history before teaching this lesson by exploring the introductory readings for each chapter of our [Confronting Apartheid](#) collection.

The following videos also offer concise overviews of South Africa during apartheid: [Apartheid: 46 Years in 90 Seconds](#) (BBC News) and [Apartheid: The rise and fall of South Africa's 'apartness' laws](#) (Global News).

2. Choosing a Reading Strategy for “Chameleon” by Trevor Noah

The central text in this lesson is Chapter 4 from Trevor Noah’s engaging memoir *It’s Trevor: Born a Crime, Stories from a South African Childhood* (young readers’ adapted edition). While we provide guidance for reading the chapter, it is up to you to decide how your students will read the text. One approach is Reading Stations. You can assign students to stations or give them agency to choose the one that feels right for them. Depending on the size of your classroom, some students or groups may need to work quietly in the hallway or library if these spaces are available at your school.

Station 1: Students read the story silently to themselves.

Station 2: You read the story out loud to a group of students.

Station 3: Small groups of three read the story out loud together.

Alternatively, you can read the story aloud to the class. We do not recommend “popcorn”-style reading or calling on students to read because this practice can cause anxiety for students who are not comfortable reading out loud and may compromise their sense of belonging in the class.

At the time of this publication, the young-readers edition is not available as an audiobook. When it does become available, we recommend adding an audiobook station if you are able to borrow a copy from your local library, rent through Sora, or use department funds to purchase a copy.

3. Preparing to Address Text in Languages Other Than English

There are moments in the story where Trevor Noah includes italicized sentences in Xhosa, Zulu, and Afrikaans. Noah follows each sentence with the English translation, so comprehension should not be an issue for your students. Before reading the text out loud, it is important to review your classroom contract and prepare students in advance to address these sections with intention and care.

We recommend using a read-aloud strategy that invites students to process the original language in silence. We view this silence as a form of respect for the languages and cultures reflected in the text. Furthermore, this approach helps to avoid instances where a student might choose to turn the read-aloud into a disrespectful performance.

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For this strategy, when readers (students and teachers) encounter the italicized sections, they should pause for a beat to scan the text to themselves. Then they can pick up again with the English translation in the next sentence. You can establish a respectful tone by first explaining the purpose of the silence to your students and then modeling the strategy by reading the first three paragraphs out loud to the class. As a reminder, it is important not to single out any students who you believe may speak Xhosa, Zulu, or Afrikaans to serve as experts, although, of course, they may choose to volunteer and be excited to share what they know about the language and culture.

Lesson Plan

Activities

Day 1

1. Present a Brief Overview of South African History

Project the **A Brief Overview of South Africa during Apartheid** slides. Use the content on the slides and talking points in the speaker notes to provide students with a historical framework before they read a chapter from Trevor Noah's memoir. It is especially important that they understand how race was socially constructed under the apartheid regime in order to fully engage with Noah's story, so please do not skip this step.

Let students know that they will be reading a chapter titled "Chameleon" from Trevor Noah's memoir. Have them do a quick pair-share to predict, based on what they learned about South African history during apartheid, what the chapter might be about.

2. Read "Chameleon" by Trevor Noah

Pass out the reading "**Chameleon**" from *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime* and explain the Reading Stations approach if you are using this procedure (see **Teaching Note 2**). For the first read, instruct students to jot down the following annotations (these should be quick notes that don't disrupt the flow of their reading):

- **Place a heart (♥)** by moments in the story that resonate with you, perhaps because of who you are or your experiences in the world.

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- **Place a question mark (?)** in places where you feel confused, perhaps because you don't understand a vocabulary term or the author assumes you know something you don't know.
- **Place an emoji** (smiling, frowning, angry, etc.) by moments where you have an emotional response.
- **Underline** places where you see Trevor Noah trying to fit in, feeling like he belongs, or feeling like he doesn't belong.

Explain to students that, while the story is written in English, there are places where Trevor Noah, who is multiracial and multilingual, writes in Xhosa (pronounced kō-sə), Zulu, or Afrikaans and then provides an English translation. Review your classroom contract to set the tone for a respectful reading of the story and establish expectations for how the class should address these points in the text when reading aloud.

Explain to students that as they read, when they encounter italicized sections in Xhosa, Zulu, or Afrikaans, they should pause for a beat to scan the text to themselves. Then they can pick up again with the English translation in the next sentence. Explain that accurate pronunciation is very important when saying people's names and using languages other than the ones we already speak, and that when there is any uncertainty about how to pronounce something correctly, reading silently instead of out loud is a gesture of respect for the languages and cultures reflected in the text.

Model reading aloud with the first three paragraphs while students listen and jot down annotations. Then move students into Reading Stations to finish reading the chapter.

3. Reflect with a Golden Line Journal Response

Let students know that they will be discussing Trevor Noah's story in the next class. To reflect on the text, have students choose a "golden line"—one or two sentences that resonate with them, perhaps because they reflect something about their own identities or experiences, teach them something about the world, or because of how they are crafted.

Instruct students to copy their "golden line" in their [journals](#) and then explain why it resonates with them. They can finish this task for homework as needed. Let them know that they will be sharing their responses with a peer in the next class.

Day 2

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1. Create an Identity Chart for Trevor Noah

Start the class with students sitting in pairs. Invite them to share their “golden line” journal responses from Day 1.

Then explain to students that they will be working with their partner to create an identity chart for Trevor Noah to help them consider how aspects of Noah’s identity influence his sense of belonging in his neighborhood and school.

Follow the instructions for the [Identity Charts](#) teaching strategy. Generate a list of factors that make up an individual’s identity and write them on the board. Then start to create an identity chart for Trevor Noah on the board while students record ideas in their notes. Because these concepts are central to “Chameleon,” include race and language. It is important to remind students what they learned in the previous class: that racial categories during apartheid in South Africa differed from racial constructions in the United States. Then have pairs continue to add to Noah’s identity chart, referring to the text for ideas.

- Create groups of four from the pairs. Students can share their identity charts, adding any new information to their own charts.
- Once they have completed identity charts for Trevor Noah, discuss the following questions as a class:
 - What parts of his identity does Trevor Noah choose for himself?
 - What aspects of his identity are influenced by how others perceive him or by the norms of South African society?
 - Whose opinions and beliefs have the greatest effect on how Trevor Noah thinks about his own identity?

2. Engage in a Notable Quotable Discussion

Let students know that next, they will be thinking about the ways in which our identities can influence the groups we belong to and the groups we are excluded from. Remind students that they discussed “in” and “out” groups in a previous lesson when they read “The Importance of Belonging.”

Students should remain in their groups of four. Pass out the **Notable Quotable Passages from “Chameleon” by Trevor Noah** and instruct groups to spread them out on their tables. Give students a few minutes to familiarize themselves with the passages by reading them silently, or you can read them out loud.

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Explain to students that they will be using the passages to help them discuss four questions about “Chameleon.” You will project the questions one at a time. Model the first activity by discussing the first question as a whole class. Then have groups work on their own for the next two questions. Give groups about five minutes to discuss each question. Circulate during their discussion.

- **Question 1:** Why do you think Trevor Noah titled this chapter of his memoir “Chameleon”?
- **Question 2:** What are some of the boundaries that Trevor Noah negotiates in “Chameleon”?
- **Question 3:** How do these boundaries influence his experiences of belonging in school and in his neighborhood?
- **Question 4:** What steps does Trevor Noah take to gain acceptance from others and deepen his sense of belonging in the spaces he occupies—for example, with his family, in his neighborhood, with peer groups, and at school?

3. Discuss “Chameleon” as a Class

Invite volunteers from the groups to share their responses to the three discussion questions with the class, supporting their ideas with examples from the text.

Then project and discuss the following questions as a class:

- a. How can we reduce barriers to belonging for ourselves and others in our school and community?
- b. What lessons can we apply from “Chameleon” and from other recent texts to help us answer this question?

Homework

Write a Response to Trevor Noah

Have students choose two of the following questions to explore in a letter to Trevor Noah. Instruct them to write “Dear Trevor” at the top of the page and then introduce themselves before diving into the questions that they choose.

- What new, different, or deeper ideas do you have about fitting in and belonging after reading “Chameleon” by Trevor Noah?

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- What connections can you make between Trevor Noah's experience of negotiating belonging in his neighborhood and schools and your own experiences? What connections can you make between the way individuals and groups negotiate belonging in Noah's story and in the world today?
- What lesson can you take from Noah's story that you'd like to apply to your own life?