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Laughter through Pain

Erma Bombeck once said, "there is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt." Comedy and tragedy are showcased in Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, where he recounts growing up in South Africa, from sneakily taking dumps on the kitchen floor to enduring the trauma of his mother being shot in the face by his stepfather. Trevor Noah is a renowned comedian, talk show host, and author. For five years, he has hosted his American talk show and news satire television program, *The Daily Show*. In an incredibly hilarious and simultaneously touching collection of stories, Noah discusses his life growing up during apartheid and the transition society endured after, his relationships with his mother, father, family, friends, girls, and stepfather. He chronicles events that shed tears of laughter and abject horror in an entirely successful and beautifully written manner. In his memoir, Noah showcases he values connection specifically through language, community, spirituality, and family values through vulnerable storytelling. He also tells stories through a lens of comedy, showcasing how he copes through his humor and expresses his emotional experience of traumatic events through a comedic vehicle.

Noah was someone who wanted desperately to feel a sense of belonging as a result of being colored (what South Africans call a person of biracial parents) and raised by a black family who treated him differently. He realized that language allowed him to connect with individuals and feel as though he belonged in their community. Because of this he practiced many languages

of South Africa. His knowledge of Xhosa, Zulu, Tsonga, Afrikaans, Tswana, Southern Sotho, and English provided advantages. This value of language came from his mother. Noah described this by saying, "Living with my mom, I saw how she used language to.. handle situations, navigate the world." (53) He narrates a shopping trip with his mom, where they encountered a cashier who spoke Afrikaans and told the security guard in his tongue to watch "these blacks" in case they stole. He assumed Noah and his mother didn't know the language. However, Noah's mother retorted a swift comeback in fluent Afrikaans, which resulted in a still racist but profuse apology. Another time, when Noah was walking home, a gang saw him and whispered amongst themselves in Zulu to jump him. Because Noah knew Zulu and heard them, he spoke back to them, and they thought he was one of them. Noah used his value of language to navigate the world as a "chameleon," he stated. "My color didn't change, but I could change your perception of color..Maybe, I didn't look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you." (54) The feeling of truly being one of a group and community was one he wanted badly. He discussed his experience in primary school in a chapter entitled *Outsider*. "At break, as the only mixed kid out of a thousand, I faced the same predicament ..Where was I supposed to go?" (137) He talked about how his fellow colored kids thought he was too black because of his Afro, and others thought he was too white because of his Christian upbringing. He was too poor to hang out with the white kids, and the black kids lived far away and had their own groups, so he was never able to get to know them. When Noah was old enough and decided to move out, he settled in "the hood" and spoke a great deal about the community there, one he felt he belonged in. He described the hood as a place where everyone knew everyone, and you were obligated to help elderly ladies with errands if you were available. He spoke of the hood warmly saying, "People take care of one another..The biggest thing in the hood is that you have to share. You don't get rich on your own.

You have money? Why aren't you helping people?..Everyone pitches in. You spread it around."

(217) The main reason Noah valued both language and community was that he cared about connecting with people. One time he ended up in jail, an unfortunate product of living in the hood, and a terrifying-looking man entered the cell. Noah described him as "the largest man he had ever seen" and referred to him as "Hulk." Everyone in the cell was scared of him, but when he heard the man speak Tongsa to the guard, Noah knew he would be able to connect with him. They spoke in Tongsa and Noah said that he was actually "the sweetest man, the gentlest giant, the biggest teddy bear in the world." (235) Noah helped him, giving him tips on proceeding with his bail, and they ended up becoming friends. Because of these anecdotes, we learn how hard it was for Noah to feel like he belonged being colored and how he tried so hard his entire life to feel like he fit in somewhere. Using language as a vehicle, Noah could connect with people in the hood and even in jail to feel a sense of community.

Noah also valued his religion, which fell hand in hand with his familial value. Growing up, Noah's mom was adamant about attending church every Sunday. Throughout the memoir, Noah displays a reverence for his family and their faith, especially his mom's. He discussed how religion filled the void of absent men in the women who raised him. They had prayer meetings, and in them, his grandmother taught him that his prayers were special, and because of that, he wanted to connect with and help people by praying for them. He stated, "I loved to pray. My grandmother always told me she loved my prayers." This was because Noah prayed in English, and his grandmother felt that the South African Bible being written in English meant that English prayers were answered first. He explained, "My grandmother wanted me to pray for everyone. I loved doing it. My grandmother convinced my prayers got answered. I felt like I was helping people." (39) He also spoke about his mom in great detail as their relationship was by far the

most essential aspect of his memoir. He respected her with every ounce of himself and made that explicitly clear. He described her as a woman of undeniable strength and courage, braver and more special than most. He recounted a time when apartheid was dismantling and how his mom handled riots in the streets. "Whenever the riots broke out, all our neighbors would wisely hole up behind closed doors. But not my mom. She'd head straight out, and as we'd inch our way past the blockades, she'd give the rioters this look. Let me pass. I'm not involved in this shit. She was unwavering in the face of danger. That always amazed me." (274) He presented this instance to show pride and admiration for his mother. The two values intertwined when Noah had to endure the shooting of his mother by his abusive stepfather. He described his reaction when he got the call about his mother's condition, "My cry was not a cry of sadness. It was not catharsis. It wasn't me feeling sorry for myself. It was an expression of raw pain that came from an inability of my body to express that pain in any other way, shape, or form. She was my mom. She was my teammate. It had always been me and her together, me and her against the world. When Andrew said, 'shot her in the head,' I broke in two." (274) The emotion and vulnerability in this chapter and the heartbreak and pain Noah felt at the prospect of his mother's death was undeniable. When he made it to the hospital, the doctors told him she didn't have health insurance, and the surgery and X-rays she needed might cost him millions and leave him in crippling debt. He gave them his card and told them to save his mom regardless, and when she came out of surgery, the doctor described her as a miracle case. The bullet went into the back of her head, missed her spinal cord and every major vein artery and nerve by a hair, ricocheted off her cheek-bone breaking it, and went out of her left nostril. Only a small flap of skin in her nose had been scraped by the bullet, leaving no bullet fragments; she solely required stitches and days to heal. He asked his mom after she had healed why she didn't have health insurance. "Oh but I do have

insurance.. Jesus' she said." Noah replied, "You know for once, I can't argue with you." (284)
She believed God was the reason she was alive, and Noah believed it too.

Noah establishes vulnerability by explaining his thoughts in every experience and moment. He told the readers he used language to be a chameleon to feel a sense of belonging, even if it was based on others' false perceptions of him. He wondered as a colored child where he would go at recess because he didn't fit in with any groups. His driving force in his love for praying is the thought that he is helping and connecting with people. He made clear he was amazed by his mother and proud of her bravery. He described his feelings of unbelievable pain and anguish at the idea of losing her. He maintained emotion and showed the reader what he values by letting us in his mind to grasp his character. With all of this, though, Trevor moves through his most traumatic and deep memories using humor. Being "born a crime," a child of a biracial couple, illegal under apartheid, Noah couldn't acknowledge his father in public. He explained, "We were in the park, he was walking a good bit away from us, and I ran after him, screaming, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" people started looking. He panicked and ran away. I thought it was a game and kept chasing him. (My mom) would hold my hand or carry me. But if the police showed up, she would have to drop me and pretend I wasn't hers, like I was a bag of weed." (27) His parents were not allowed to claim him, and he couldn't belong to anyone. The line about his mother pretending he wasn't hers and dropping him like a bag of weed was crucial in determining his character. He told this part of his childhood with a metaphor that was purely his voice as a comedian being funny but also profound and heartwrenching. The tone Trevor Noah kept during his memoir was one of humor that intertwined with his childhood anecdotes. He seamlessly moved between traumatic stories to those meant solely for comedic effect and some with both. His comedic tone with heavier moments was a particular style that allowed the

reader to understand how he copes. Humor also helped him find the sense of belonging he craved, just as language did. He stated, "I learned that even though I didn't belong to one group, I could be a part of any group that was laughing." (139) At the end of the book, Noah relays a conversation with his mom after the shooting that truly allows the reader to see why he expresses his trauma through comedy. "The second (she opened her eyes)... I started bawling. 'No, baby. Baby, don't cry. Trevor. Trevor, listen to me. My child, you must look on the bright side.' 'What are you talking about, 'the bright side'? Mom, you were shot in the face. There is no bright side.' 'Of course, there is. Now you are the best-looking person in the family.' We sat there, and she squeezed my hand, and we cracked up the way we did, mother and son, laughing together through the pain." (280)

The nature of Trevor Noah's self-examination is a passionate and political one. Noah tackles the racism he endured being a biracial child born during apartheid and the realities of being colored in a country where racism was accepted and normalized. He tackles the blatant mistreatment of women in South Africa and unjust nature of the policing system. He relates this to the similar issues consistent in the United States and current American events, making his words relevant and significant. Along with political importance, his memoir moves and provokes a real emotional response. Trevor's discovery of his mom's shooting was a chapter that left me sobbing, flipping the pages in horror. I stared in shock as the events unfolded as well as the miracle that preceded it. I was in awe of the narrative he told and saw his mother as an icon and role model. Her independence in raising her son and the strength she possessed living in a constant battle against sexism and racism was inspiring to read as a young woman of color. Through his memories and struggles, we learn the author has been through a great deal and holds

an amount of strength that is beyond moving. He is an upstanding, hilarious individual with an inspiring story he told in a very Trevor Noah-like manner.

Works Cited

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