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Longing for Belonging: The Universality of Born a Crime

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Longing for Belonging: The Universality of *Born a Crime*

Throughout the course of our lives, we experience moments when we feel as though we do not belong. Whether explicitly or implicitly, with basis in physical or intangible factors, we perceive ourselves as dissimilar from those around us. For some, these moments are steeped in racial or gender discrimination. For others, they may be the result of bullying. For me, it was in elementary school, when I was told by several girls in my class that I couldn't sit with them. The reason they gave was that they were exchanging gifts and didn't want me to feel left out, but I knew that this was simply an excuse for the truth: they didn't think I belonged with them. At the time, I felt hurt, confused, angry, and rejected; but I moved on, and over the years discovered the universality of my experience, both in life and in literature. This is why, despite the differences that exist between myself and Trevor Noah, I immediately related to his autobiography, *Born a Crime*. I believe that this book should be utilized in the AP Literature curriculum to provide perspective as part of the study of meaning, truth, and reality and to foster discussion of the universal theme of belonging.

This work would provide a valuable addition to the classroom because of the lessons it teaches and the lens through which they are taught. Noah's descriptions of not belonging are relatable and heartbreaking because they are reflections of his own experiences. In Chapter 11, he remarks how, at school, he was "...the only mixed kid out of a thousand...with so many different groups to choose from, [and] wasn't a natural constituent of any particular one..." (138). While Noah's perspective is different from others, feelings of dissimilarity from one's peers are a fairly universal phenomenon. All humans crave acceptance, and when we feel we are not welcomed by others for who we are, we feel alone. However, Noah is able to turn his feelings of isolation into a somewhat positive experience. He becomes the "tuck shop guy" and finds a sort of niche: "I learned that even though I didn't belong to one group, I could be a part of any group that was laughing. I'd drop in, pass out the snacks, tell a few jokes...I wasn't popular, but I wasn't an outcast. I was everywhere with everybody, and at the same time I was all by myself" (141). Anecdotes such as this will inspire students to greet hardships in their lives in a similar

way; this episode is one of many in *Born a Crime* that describes a challenge Noah faces in his early life and how he rises to this challenge with heart and humor.

Trevor Noah's unique perspective is why I firmly believe that his autobiography should become a staple in AP Literature. Not only does he speak to, with depth and humor, the aforementioned theme of belonging, one that we examined to great lengths last year in novels such as *The Bluest Eye* and *The Metamorphosis*, but is also incredibly different from the works already on the reading list. For one, *Born a Crime* is not fiction. It consists of anecdotal, storytelling techniques that make it read like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Life of Pi*, but is deeply steeped in a modern reality, describing coming-of-age traditions like school dances and popular culture such as rap music. However, the themes of meaning, truth, and reality, all of which we studied and discussed in great depth, are present in *Born a Crime*. We see Noah search for meaning in his life as he ponders where he belongs. We see him search for truth in his complicated relationship with religion. We see him time and time again face the reality that he has been presented with. Thus, this work will fit perfectly with the themes and curriculum of AP Literature, while at the same time standing apart from the rest as a thoroughly relatable and modern read. Students who read this inspirational work of literature will empathize with Noah as he endures the trials and tribulations of his youth. They will gain insight into the idea of belonging and probe deeply into the "why" and "how" of why humans seek acceptance and what factors affect whether or not it is granted. They will compare *Born a Crime* to their own lives and experiences and after reading it take with them a more profound and empathetic understanding of the human condition.