

Handout

Notable Quotable Passages from “Chameleon” by Trevor Noah

Teacher directions: Cut along the dotted lines to prepare the passages for the Notable Quotable group discussion of “Chameleon” from *It’s Trevor Noah: Born a Crime*.

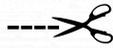
Passage 1: Living with my mom, I saw how she used language to cross boundaries, handle situations, navigate the world. . . . I learned to use language like my mother did. I would simulcast—give you the program in your own tongue. I’d get suspicious looks from people just walking down the street. “Where are you from?” they’d ask. I’d reply in whatever language they’d addressed me in, using the same accent that they used. There would be a brief moment of confusion, and then the suspicious look would disappear. “Oh, okay. I thought you were a stranger. We’re good then.” (Page 2)



Passage 2: [A group of Zulu guys] were ready to do me violent harm, until they felt we were part of the same tribe, and then we were cool. That, and so many other smaller incidents in my life, made me realize that language, even more than color, defines who you are to people.

I became a chameleon. My color didn’t change, but I could change your perception of my color. I didn’t look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you. (Page 3)

Passage 3: I was eleven years old and it was like I was seeing my country for the first time. In the townships you don't see segregation, because everyone is black. In the white world, any time my mother took me to a white church, we were the only black people there, and my mom didn't separate herself from anyone. She didn't care. She'd go right up and sit with the white people. And at Maryvale, the kids were mixed up and hanging out together. Before that day, I had never seen people being so together and yet not together, occupying the same space yet choosing not to associate with each other in any way. In an instant I could see, I could feel, how the boundaries were drawn. Groups moved in color patterns across the yard, up the stairs, down the hall. It was insane. (Page 4)



Passage 4: The black kids were fascinated. It wasn't common to find a white or colored person who spoke African languages. The fact that I did speak them immediately endeared me to the black kids.

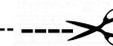
"How come you speak our languages?" they asked.

"Because I'm black," I said, "like you."

"You're not black."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not. Have you not seen yourself?" (Page 5)



Passage 5: Being at H. A. Jack made me realize I was black. Before that recess, I'd never had to choose, but when I was forced to choose, I chose black. The world saw me as colored, but I didn't spend my life looking at myself. I spent my life looking at other people. I saw myself as the people around me, and the people around me were black. My cousins are black. My mom is black. My gran is black. I grew up black. Because I had a white father, because I'd been in white Sunday school, I got along with the white kids, but I didn't belong with the white kids. I wasn't a part of their tribe. But the black kids embraced me. With the black kids, I wasn't constantly trying to be. With the black kids, I just was. (Page 6)