

BOOKS NOVEMBER 13, 2016 9:01 PM

On Miami Book Fair's opening night, Trevor Noah reflects on racism, apartheid



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Miami

At the end of what Miami Book Fair co-founder Mitchell Kaplan called “an emotional week,” comedian Trevor Noah kicked off the 33rd annual fair not with jokes but with a thoughtful analysis of racism and apartheid.

“The very existence of me was against the law,” he explained to an appreciative, sold-out audience at Miami Dade College while discussing his memoir “Born a Crime” (Spiegel & Grau, \$28). In the book, Noah writes about growing up in South Africa with a Swiss father and a Xhosa mother and how that shaped his childhood.

“I was considered a superior race to my own mother,” he said, “and inferior to my own father.”

In conversation with local attorney Bob Weisberg, Noah talked about how he viewed his family situation — his white father was not allowed to be seen with him, and his dark-skinned mother had to pretend to be a maid to take her son out in public (Noah was classified as “colored” in apartheid terms). He spent most of his time with his mother and her family.

“I thought fathers were white and uncles were black,” he joked.

But most of the evening he spoke eloquently about growing up in the township of Soweto. The government forced blacks into Soweto, but what they didn’t realize is how that would create a bond between the oppressed people.

“In trying to keep a group separated and helpless and hopeless, what happened was the people in Soweto became more determined,” he said. “There was a fire that couldn’t be extinguished by a hateful government.”

For example: He and his mother shared a toilet and a water tap with four different families. But such deprivations only drove people closer. “That became the strength of our community.”

Noah also told the crowd he felt lucky to be born when he was.

“If I’d been born a few years earlier I would’ve been subjected to more racism,” he said. Had he been born later, he added, he wouldn’t have realized how hard people struggled for freedom.

“I’m glad I was old enough to see the transition,” he said.

He’s also deeply grateful to his mother, who still lives in South Africa.

“She was preparing me for a life of freedom long before freedom existed,” he said.

The audience seemed eager for a comment on the presidential election but never got it. What it did get, though, was an assertion from Kaplan that “We need the big tent of the book fair more than ever.”

Earlier in the day at the fair, Jorge Ramos spoke to a packed house in the Chapman Conference Center, while children’s author Eoin Colfer, author of the Artemis Fowl series, spoke about his new book “Iron Man: The Gauntlet.”

The fair continues Monday with political analyst James Carville and actor Alan Cumming.

IF YOU GO

What: Miami Book Fair

When: Through Nov. 20

Where: Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus, 300 NE Second Ave., downtown Miami

Tickets and information: www.miamibookfair.com

Schedule of events this week

Monday: James Carville, 6 p.m.; Alan Cumming, 8 p.m.; \$15

Tuesday: Geraldine Brooks, 6 p.m.; Maureen Dowd, 8 p.m.; \$15

Wednesday: Tavis Smiley, 6 p.m.; \$15

Thursday: Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf, 6 p.m.; Jeffrey Toobin, 8 p.m.; \$15

Friday: An Evening with the National Book Awards Winners and Finalists, 6 p.m.; \$15

Street fair: Friday through Sunday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; \$8 for adults, \$5 for 13-18 and over 62, 12 and under free



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