

# Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

## Contemporary Literature Portfolio

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*Dante can swim. Ari can't. Dante is articulate and self-assured. Ari has a hard time with words and suffers from self doubt. Dante gets lost in poetry and art. Ari gets lost in thoughts of his older brother who is in prison. Dante is fair skinned. Ari's features are much darker. It seems that a boy like Dante, with his open and unique perspective on life, would be the last person to break down the walls that Ari has built around himself.*

*But against all odds, when Ari and Dante meet, they develop a special bond that will teach them the most important truths of their lives, and help define the people they want to be. But there are big hurdles in their way, and only by believing in each other—and the power of their friendship—can Ari and Dante emerge stronger on the other side.*

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**Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe** by Benjamin Alire Sáenz is a coming-of-age novel about two Mexican-American teenage boys—Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza and Dante Quintana—who befriended each other in a summer. The story is set in El Paso, Texas, around the year of 1987. The book doesn't have a complicated plot. Rather, it revolves around the lives of these two boys (especially Ari's) and how they navigate their teenage years. It's about family, friends, and romance.

The reason I picked this book to be a part of my portfolio is clear. The book portrays same-sex relationship and the struggles that come with it (although it doesn't *only* focus on those struggles). There are three significant parts in **Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe** (from now I'm going to shorten it to ADDSU) that I want to mention below.

1. **Fear of disappointing your loved ones.** Being LGBT+ comes with a lot of disadvantages, even if they can't help it (it's not what they *become* or *try to be*, it's what they *are*). One of those disadvantages is feeling worried and scared about what other people will think of them, especially their loved ones. In ADDSU, Dante—who had come to terms with his own sexuality and fully acknowledged it—was scared to tell his parents that he was gay, because he didn't want to disappoint them.

*The thing is I love my dad. My mom too. And I keep wondering what they're going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. I wonder how that's going to go over? I'm the only son. What's going to happen with the grandchildren thing? I hate that*

*I'm going to disappoint them, Ari. I know I've disappointed you too. [...] I guess I'm just going to tell my dad. I have this little speech. It starts with something like this. "Dad, I have something to say to you. I like boys. Don't hate me. Please don't hate me. I mean, Dad, you're a boy too." The speech doesn't really fit together very well. It needs some work. It sounds too needy. I hate that. I don't want to be needy. Just because I'm playing for the other team doesn't mean that I'm this pathetic human being who's begging to be loved.*

*(Dante's letter to Ari)*

*"I hope to God that my mother has a boy. And he better like girls. Because if he doesn't, I'll kill him."*

*(What Dante said to Ari when he found out his mother was going to have another baby)*

*When we finally got quiet again, I heard Dante's voice and it seemed so small in the desert night. "I have to tell them, Ari."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because I have to."*

*"But what if you fall in love with a girl?"*

*"That's not going to happen, Ari."*

*"They'll always love you, Dante."*

*He didn't say anything. And then I heard him crying. So I just let him cry. There was nothing I could do. Except listen to his pain. I could do that. I could hardly stand it. But I could do that. Just listen to his pain.*

*"Dante," I whispered. "Can't you see how much they love you?"*

*"I'm going to disappoint them. Just like I've disappointed you."*

*"You haven't disappointed me, Dante."*

*"You're just saying that because I'm crying."*

*"No, Dante." I got up from where I was lying and sat on the edge of the open tailgate of the truck. He sat up and we stared at each other. "Don't cry, Dante. I'm not disappointed."*

*"But why didn't he tell me, Ari?"*

*"He didn't want to disappoint you. [...] He's crazy about you. I guess you know that."*

*"If he's so crazy about me, then why didn't he tell me."*

*"Talking to dads isn't that easy. Even you, Sam."*

*He sipped on his coffee nervously.*

*"He was so happy that you were going to have another baby. And not just because he was going to be a big brother. And he said, 'He has to be a boy and he has to like girls.' That's what he said. So that you could have grandchildren. So that you could be happy."*

*"I don't care about grandchildren. I care about Dante."*

(Ari's conversation with Sam, Dante's father)

It's important to note that Dante's parents in this book were the most loving, caring, and accepting people, and Dante was still afraid to tell them. This shows that coming out can be really hard, even if it's to the kindest people. It doesn't matter how kind and accepting people can be—there will always be fear and worry. They will always think of the worst case scenario—getting kicked out of the house, getting disowned by family, being judged and bullied, even getting killed—because there's always a possibility of that happening.

2. **Coming to terms with your own feelings.** Coming out (the act of openly sharing with other people about your sexual orientation or gender identity) is certainly difficult, but coming in (the process of acknowledging and accepting your sexual orientation or gender identity) is not exactly easier. People in the LGBT+ community sometimes struggle with accepting their own identity, and this is due to the fact that heterosexuality is seen as “the normal path” and “the default” in society. This creates a lot of discomfort, shame, and denial in LGBT+ people. There are many cases where homophobic people realize, later in life, that they are in fact gay, and their aggression towards other LGBT+ people in the past happened because of their own discomfort and denial of their sexuality. There are also many cases where LGBT+ people spend a lot of time running away from their own feelings.

*“Ari, it's time you stopped running.”*

*I looked at my dad. “From what?”*

*“Don't you know?”*

*“What?”*

*“If you keep running, it will kill you.”*

*“What, Dad?”*

*“You and Dante.”*

*“Me and Dante?” I looked at my mother. Then looked at my father.*

*[...]*

*“Ari, the problem isn't just that Dante's in love with you. The real problem—for you, anyway—is that you're in love with him.”*

*I didn't say anything. I just kept looking at my mother's face. And then my father's face.*

*I didn't know what to say. “I'm not sure, I mean, I don't think that's true. I mean, I just don't think so. I mean—”*

*“Ari, I know what I see. You saved his life. Why do you suppose you did that? Why do you suppose that, in an instant, without even thinking, you dove across the street and shoved Dante out of the way of a moving car? You think that just happened? I think you*

*couldn't stand the thought of losing him. You just couldn't. Why would you risk your own life to save Dante if you didn't love him?"*

*"Because he's my friend."*

*"And why would you go and beat the holy crap out of a guy who hurt him? Why would you do that? All of your instincts, Ari, all of them, tell me something. You love that boy."*

*I kept staring down at the table.*

*"I think you love him more than you can bear."*

*"Dad? Dad, no. No. I can't. I can't. Why are you saying these things?"*

*[...]*

*"What am I going to do? I'm so ashamed."*

*"Ashamed of what?" my mother said. "Of loving Dante?"*

*"I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be."*

In ADDSU, Ari was late to realize that he loved Dante, because he thought "it wasn't right". In reality, he actually did so much for Dante—protecting him, defending him, even literally saving his life from a car accident. He just didn't realize he was in love with him because he didn't think it was possible for him, a boy, to fall in love with another boy.

Later, when Ari has completely accepted his own feelings and told Dante about it, he felt relieved. He felt happy. Because he was being true to himself, and he was with someone he loved.

*All this time.*

*This was what was wrong with me. All this time I had been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe, the secrets of my own body, of my own heart. All of the answers had always been so close and yet I had always fought them without even knowing it. From the minute I'd met Dante, I had fallen in love with him. I just didn't let myself know it, think it, feel it.*

*[...]*

*As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free. Imagine that. Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn't afraid anymore. I thought of that look on my mother's face when I'd told her I was ashamed. I thought of that look of love and compassion that she wore as she looked at me. "Ashamed? Of loving Dante?"*

*I took Dante's hand and held it.*

*How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?*

3. **Being abused for their sexual orientation.** Another very significant part—and very real part—of this book is when Dante was beaten up by four boys when they saw him kissing another boy in an alley. Dante had to go to the hospital because of it.

*“They beat him,” he [Dante’s father] whispered. “They beat my Dante all to hell. They cracked some ribs, they punched his face. He has bruises everywhere. They did that to my son.”*

*“There was an old woman. She saw what happened. She told the police.” I knew she [Dante’s mother] wasn’t going to cry. “Dante and another boy were kissing in an alley. Some boys were walking by and saw them. And—” She tried to smile. “Well, you saw what they did to him.”*

*“I hate them,” I said.*

*“Sam told me you know about Dante.”*

*“There are worse things in the world than a boy who likes to kiss other boys.”*

*“Yes, there are,” she said.*

*I visited Dante every day. He was in the hospital for about four days. They had to make sure he was okay because he’d had a concussion. His ribs hurt.*

*He was different. Sadder.*

*The day he came home from the hospital, he cried. I held him. I thought he would never stop.*

*I knew that a part of him would never be the same.*

*They cracked more than his ribs.*

From this, we can see that LGBT+ often face dangers—like violence and hate crime—every day just for being who they are. There’s always a chance of being physically assaulted by someone because of their sexual orientation. It’s another fear of being LGBT+ that never goes away. In 2014, around 20% of hate crimes reported to the FBI happened because of the target’s sexual orientation (or perceived orientation). That is not counting the many more cases that went unreported.

Besides, there are also psychological aspects in this kind of hate crime. Like Dante in this book, LGBT+ people get hurt—not only physically, but also psychologically. This leads to a variety of mental illnesses that are common among LGBT+ people, which then leads to the high suicide rate (according to Suicide Prevention Center, 5-10% of LGBT youth,

depending on age and sex groups, have attempted suicide—the rate is 1.5 to 3 times higher than heterosexual youth.)

It's heartbreaking to learn the reality that LGBT+ people experience every day. No one should face so much hate for being who they are. LGBT+ people are not hurting anybody by having a different sexual orientation or gender identity. They just want to be true to themselves. As Ari said in this book, "*There are worse things in the world than a boy who likes to kiss other boys.*"