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Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

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“It was the most beautiful thing an adult who wasn’t my mom or dad had ever said to me. And I knew that there was something about me that Mrs. Quintana saw and loved. And even though I felt it was a beautiful thing, I also felt it was a weight. Not that she meant it to be a weight. But love was always something heavy for me. Something I had to carry.” – page 244

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012. JUV PZ7.S1273Ar 2012.

In the summer of 1987, mostly friendless teenager Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza lives what he considers to be a boring life in El Paso. One day, Ari goes to the community pool where he meets another boy his age: Dante Quintana. Opposites in most ways, Ari and Dante become fast friends and compared to Dante, the complications in Ari’s life become starkly visible. Dante has a wonderfully open relationship with his father while Ari feels that he doesn’t know his father at all. Dante is confident in himself and his own sexuality while Ari feels he will never know who he is. Moreover, Ari longs to learn about his imprisoned brother but his entire family pretends his brother never existed, and Ari feels that his life is someone else’s idea – that he lives based on the decisions of others and must meet the expectations that come with being Mexican.

Not long after Ari and Dante begin spending every day together, the two boys experience a trauma that should bring them even closer together. However, soon after, Dante reveals that he and his parents are temporarily moving to Chicago. Dante promises to write Ari and in one of his letters confesses that his feelings for Ari are more than those of a friend. Ari rarely returns Dante’s letters and completely glosses over Dante’s admission; he spends his time working, working out, occasionally hanging out with a couple of girls from school, and driving out to the desert in his new pickup truck. When Dante eventually returns to El Paso, things are awkward between the two boys. But then Dante becomes a target of discrimination and Ari is forced to recognize a truth about himself that he has so far determinedly ignored.

With a focus on love, family, and friendship, this Printz Award Honor examines race, class, and sexual identity through the lens of a coming-of-age narrative. Clipped sentences and short chapters determine the pace in a metaphor-ridden setting. The narrative is written from Ari’s perspective through a mixture of the dialogue between Ari and Dante as well as Ari’s own thoughts and emotions. The plot develops gradually and can be not only repetitive, but at times even contrived and this combination may leave some readers struggling to stay focused despite the work’s rapid pace. However, the message of love, support, and understanding at the work’s core makes this novel a good choice for any reader who has or is struggling to find and accept their true selves.