

## Aristotle and Dante Discover the Struggle of Identities and Intersectionality

At the intersection of micro and meso levels of sexual, gender, and ethnic identification are the two protagonists of the novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Throughout the story, Benjamin Alire Sáenz weaves a theme of the complex, web-like social relations that form one's identity. Through the inner turmoil of Aristotle and Dante, Sáenz explores the reality of being gay and Mexican in American society. The relationship between these two characters blooms as they come to terms with their identities. The audience gains an understanding of Ari's struggles as they read from his first-person perspective. Sáenz's presentation of the narration deepens the audience's connection to Ari and, subsequently, allows his inner conflict with his identity to resonate more deeply. Yet Sáenz's exploration of these themes is not limited to a micro level of identification. At the meso level, the protagonists struggle to connect with the communities around them, something particularly evident in their discussions of not being Mexican enough. Their continued grappling with their sexual orientation, particularly with Ari's denial of his love of Dante, adds to the themes of identity within the novel. Identity is a topic explored often in coming-of-age novels. This story, however, presents a rarer intersection of identities, presenting a more nuanced depiction of young, gay, Mexican men in a homophobic society. While being in similar situations, their individual experiences still contrast, with Dante's physical appearance prohibiting him from assuming the masculine Mexican role that Ari can more easily adopt. Dante also comes out much earlier than Aristotle. The attacks he then suffers from add to the discussion of the very real dangers of being an openly gay person in American society. Sáenz's novel calls to attention the issues at the heart of America's youth. Amongst age-old conversations of figuring out one's identity and role in

society, Sáenz presents two teens who aren't quite as easy to label. Thus, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* allows its readers to discover the secrets of young, gay, Mexican-American teens.