Reading Group Guide for

Aristotle and Dante Dive into the Waters of the World

By Benjamin Alire Sáenz

About the Book

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, two boys in a border town fell in love. Now they must discover what it means to stay in love and build a relationship in a world that seems to challenge their very existence. Regardless of what the world thinks, Ari doesn't always believe himself to be a person who is easy to love. He has been living inside his own mind and deciding his own worth for so long that he doesn't know how to fit himself into other people's lives. He doesn't know how to be a good boyfriend, a friend, a brother, or a son. And he's not always sure that he wants to let people into his life, for letting people in also opens the door to getting hurt. But something in him cracked open when he fell in love with Dante, and he can't go back. Suddenly he finds himself reaching out to new friends, standing up to bullies of all kinds, and making his voice heard. And, always, there is Dante—dreamy, witty Dante, who can get on Ari's nerves and fill him with desire all at once. The boys are determined to forge a path for themselves in a world that doesn't understand them. But when Ari is faced with a shocking loss, he'll have to fight like never before to create a life that is truthfully, joyfully his own.

Discussion Questions

1. When Dante asks if Ari's love has always been equal to his, Ari replies, "'Yes, I think so. . . . It's harder for me, Dante. You have to understand that. It will always be harder for me.'" Why was it more difficult for Ari to realize that he was in love with Dante? Do you agree with him when he says it's harder for him? Do you think there's a point in the relationship where it becomes harder for Dante? Explain your answers using examples from the book.

2. Although he knows he'll fail, Ari vows never to let Dante see that he has fears about their future, because then Dante will think Ari doesn't love him. How does this affect their relationship? Who else does Ari keep fears hidden from? Why do you think that is? Does he trust those around him with other negative emotions, such as pain or anger?

3. How do Ari's parents react to his relationship with Dante? Are they supportive? Are they happy about it? In what ways is their reaction similar to that of Dante's parents, and in what ways is it different?

4. Why must Dante and Ari act as cartographers? What things are they mapping? Can they share their maps with anyone? Are any of the other characters also acting as cartographers?

5. Both boys, but especially Dante, worry that they are not "Mexican enough" to fit into that community. At one point, Dante says, "'We'll never be Mexican enough. We'll never be American enough. And we'll never be straight enough.'" Why do you think Dante feels this way? Do you agree or disagree with his statement? Do you think they want to fit in with these groups? Do they fit in with one more than the others? What does the idea of fitting in mean to you? Explain your answers using examples from the book and your own experiences.

6. Why does Ari address his journal entries to Dante? How is writing in the journal different from the internal dialogue he always has going on? Why does he choose to write in the journal now?

7. Why does Ari enjoy running? Why is Cassandra a good running partner for him? What does Ari mean when he says, "But there was a difference between the art of running and the art of running away"?

8. Ari talks a lot about the words that live inside him. How do new words get added to this list? Why does he have so few to begin with? Is he able to share these words with the people he loves?

9. Now that Ari's family is willing to talk about Bernardo, what does Ari learn about himself? Why is it so important to him that he visit Bernardo in jail? What is he expecting to get from this visit? How does he feel after it's over?

10. What has changed in Ari's relationship with his father that allows Ari to start learning more about him? In what ways are the two similar? How do these similarities draw them together, and how do they keep them apart? What does Ari learn about his father while writing his eulogy?

11. When Ari takes Dante to the beach, he says, "I loved watching him, Dante uncensored. Dante unafraid to act like a little kid, Dante unafraid to act like a dork, unafraid to be himself, unafraid to be a part of everything around him." Is Dante always this unafraid? Why do you think that is? Why does Ari like this aspect of Dante's personality?

12. Why does Emma have such a strong connection to Ari and Dante? Do the boys like her son's painting for the same reasons, or do they each see something different in it? How does Ari feel after meeting Emma and learning about her son?

13. Ari says, "When I met Dante, I began to wake up, and I began seeing not only him, but the mean and terrible and awesome world I lived in." What makes the world "mean and terrible"? How does his relationship with Dante connect Ari to the larger world? Explain your answers.

14. Does Ari think he and Dante will be together forever? Does he want them to be? What does Dante think about their future together? Why does Ari decide to go to Paris?

15. Why do Susie, Chuy, and Ari stand up to Mrs. Livermore? How do the adults in their lives react to their protest? Do they make a difference with their actions?

16. Before Ari goes to visit Bernardo, his mother says, "'I can't protect you from your own pain, Ari. And you can't protect me from mine. . . . I have no right to take your pain away, because it's yours.'" Are there other times in the story when characters would like to have taken away another's pain? Why is it important for people to feel their grief? What does Ari's pain bring to his life? Explain your answers using examples from the story and your own experiences.

17. How does Sophocles help Ari deal with the changes in his life? What does Dante want for his brother?

18. When asked if he's afraid that their strategies will alienate people, the ACT UP spokesman says, "'Nobody's listening. We don't have anything to lose. We're dying. You want us to be nice? You think we want people to like us? They hate us.'" Do you think Ari agrees with this sentiment? Do you think he ever reaches a point where he believes he has nothing left to lose? Do any of the other characters? Explain your answers.

19. Why does Ari decide to bring flowers to the grave of "Camille"? Why does he rename her? Does the visit help him feel better?

20. What makes Ari happy? Why was he so unhappy before he met Dante? Does Ari do anything that brings happiness to others?

21. Why does Ari think of Cassandra as an adult? At what points in the story is Ari considered an adult? What causes this growth in him?

22. Why does Ari decide to let Gina, Susie, and Cassandra into his life? Is he right to trust them? How do their feelings toward him differ from his feelings toward them?

Extension Activities

1. Although some of the challenges the LGBTQIA+ community currently faces are the same, some may have changed since the late eighties, the decade in which this book was set. Research what it was like to be part of this community in 1989 compared to now. Find some first-person accounts to read, or interview members of the LGBTQIA+ community willing to talk about their experiences. Write a short report, create an infographic, or brainstorm another thoughtful way to convey your findings to educate your classmates.

2. Being able to talk to someone might have helped Rico with his struggles. You can help those in your community who are struggling with mental health issues; research the best ways to do so. Is there a peer mentoring group at your school or a helpline in your town for which you could volunteer? If not, how might you work with others to create one, or let someone know help is available for them?

3. Throughout the story, various characters make food to celebrate, grieve, make friends, and follow tradition. Choose one of the foods mentioned in the book, or one that has been an important part of your life, and make it. Share it with friends and family, or invite someone new to enjoy it with you.

4. Dante decides to read *The Sun Also Rises* because Ari is reading it. Ari's father has been discussing books with Susie's father for years. Form a book group of your own to discuss the books that matter to you. Which book will you select first? Will you ask the group to come with some discussion questions, or will you open the floor to conversation?

5. The characters in this book combat racism, and that fight is still going on today. Between the Black Lives Matter movement and pandemic-related anti-Asian incidents, there have been many recent opportunities to speak out against bigotry. How can you get involved in the fight for equality? Find a protest to attend, a group to join, or a congressperson to write. There are many ways to fight!

6. Dante writes a love poem for Ari. Try your hand at writing a love poem, whether for your significant other, a family member, a close friend, or even an inanimate object that is meaningful to you. How easy or difficult is it for you to share your feelings?

Guide written by Cory Grimminck, Director of the Portland District Library in Michigan.

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