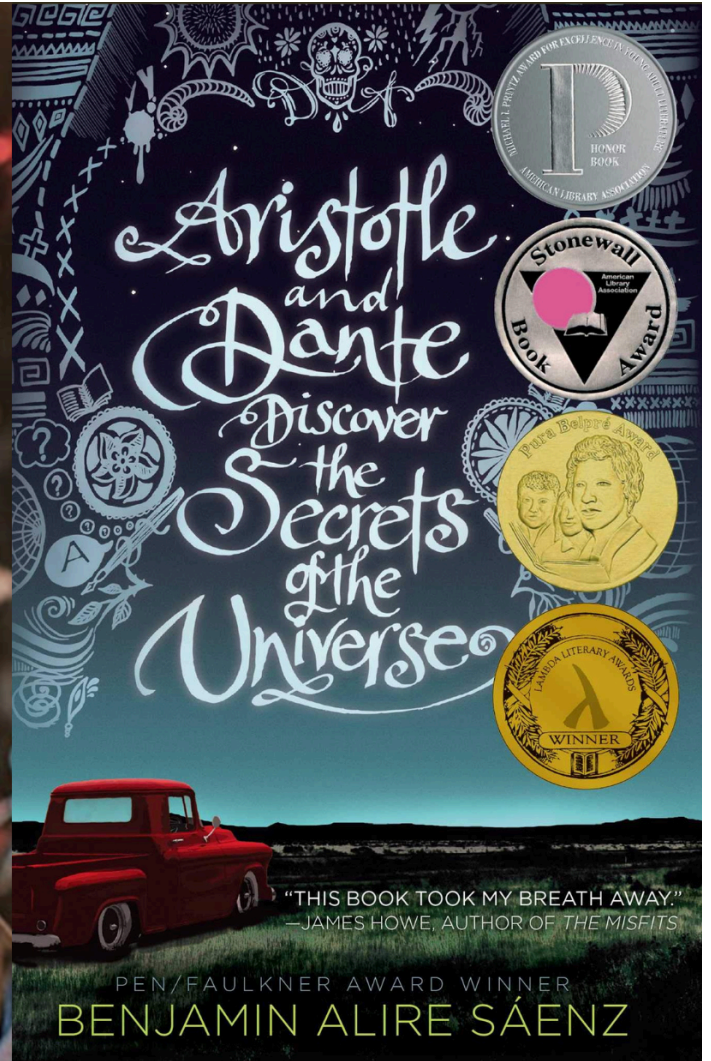
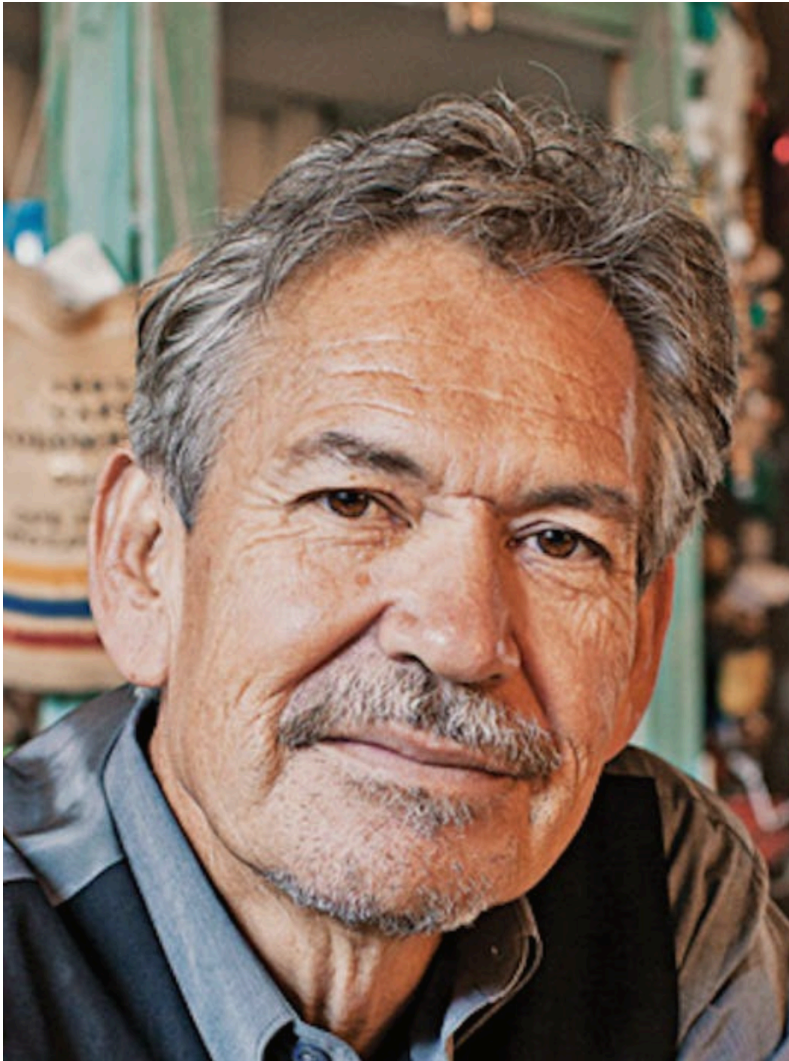


Aristotle and  
Dante Discover  
the Secrets of  
the Universe

Benjamin  
Alire  
Sáenz



Book Club



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## How to use this kit

This kit contains a variety of sheets to be used for discussion. It begins with an introduction to Benjamin Alire Sáenz and a discussion of the novel's context to jumpstart book club conversations. Then there are four pages that focus on one theme or element. You can discuss all four or pick which ones you would like to use. Each of these sheets includes discussion questions, interactive activities, and sparks to inspire service-related conversations. At the back of the kit, there is a list of community resources for chapters interested in pursuing service projects related to the collection's themes. Once you've completed your book club experience, don't forget to share it on social media with Sigma Tau Delta!

## Introduction

In Benjamin Alire Sáenz's award winning novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a beautiful coming-of-age story set in 1987 El Paso, Texas features two Mexican-American teenagers, Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza and Dante Quintana, as they navigate the twists and turns of family, friendship, identity, and love.

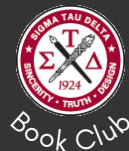
## Context

Discussion of the context surrounding the story inside of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a great way to dive into the text and the deeper themes, symbols, and motifs. A few of the common themes in the novel are things such as, identity, family, friendship, and the journey of self-discovery. When discussing the novel within your group, you can use these questions to jumpstart conversations:

1. How do Ari and Dante change over the course of the novel? What key events contribute to their personal growth?
2. Both Ari and Dante have complex relationships with their families. How do their parents shape their identities and influence their journeys?
3. The book is set in the 1980s. How does the time period impact the story, especially in terms of societal expectations around identity and sexuality?

Aristotle and  
Dante Discover  
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Friendship  
&  
Love



## Introduction

Throughout the novel, Friendship and Love are themes we see often. The discussion of what friendship is, who deserves friendship, and Aristotle and Dante's friendship come up often. Both of the main characters struggle with friendship and making friends in general and becoming friends with each other changes their lives. Love is also a big theme, both with their parental love and the love they find for each other.

## Questions

1. How does the relationship between Ari and Dante evolve?
2. Were there moments where you felt frustrated with either of them during their evolving friendship?
3. What do you think makes Ari and Dante's friendship so special? Have you ever had a friendship that changed the way you see yourself or the world?
4. How do Ari's and Dante's parents show love differently? How do their parents' attitudes toward love and identity shape their sons' experiences?

## Activities

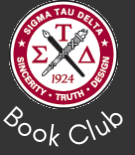
1. Since letters play a role in Ari and Dante's relationship, have each person write a short, heartfelt letter to a friend (real or fictional). You can either share them aloud or keep them private.
2. Prepare a set of "Would You Rather?" questions based on themes from the book.  
Examples:
  - Would you rather be best friends with Ari or Dante?
  - Would you rather grow up in Ari's or Dante's family?
  - Would you rather have an open heart like Dante or be more guarded like Ari?

## Sparks for Service

1. Because letters play a large role for Ari and Dante, and Ari's brother being in prison is a big part of the story, have your group look into becoming pen-pals with local prisoners in your area.
2. Since Ari and Dante's story is about self-acceptance and love, see if your group could write supportive letters to LGBTQ+ youth through organizations like *The Trevor Project* or *Letters to Strangers* (which focuses on mental health).

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# Manhood & Masculinity



## Introduction

Manhood and masculinity are important themes in the novel, as each main character grapples with these concepts. Both Ari and Dante must confront different representations of masculinity as they discover more about themselves, each other, and the world around them.

## Questions

1. How is masculinity or “being a man” represented for each of the boys? What is similar or different about their first perceptions of masculinity?
2. How do you think the narrative portrays and responds to toxic masculinity? What do you notice about the characters’ responses?
3. What notions about manhood and masculinity are subverted, complicated, or reinforced throughout the book?
4. In what ways did you see Ari’s and Dante’s feelings about masculinity affecting their feelings about sexuality?

## Activities

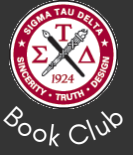
1. Encourage members to draw/write some things that they think represent masculinity or manhood, and share your thoughts!
2. Ask members to consider the different representations of gender and sexuality *they* experienced growing up and compare it to the novel: where do those concepts originate from, and how do they reach us?

## Sparks for Service

1. Consider volunteering with local mental health affiliates or Crisis Text Line to support others.
2. Host a community event inviting others to share their own experiences or struggles regarding gender and sexuality.

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# Multicultural Identity





## Introduction

Though both are Mexican-American, Ari and Dante have very different experiences with their multicultural identities. Each of them has a different relationship with that part of their identity, and that relationship shapes their own approach to the world.

## Questions

1. How are these parts of their identities in conflict with one another? How is it different between Ari and Dante?
2. Did you notice any examples of multicultural identity being linked to social class? How do these aspects of identity affect or relate to each other?
3. What role do you think language plays in Ari's and Dante's feelings about their identities as Mexican-Americans?
4. By the end of the novel, how (if at all) have Ari and Dante shifted their perspective about their own cultural identities?

## Activities

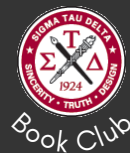
1. Have members make a pie chart to describe the multiple aspects of their cultural identity: each "slice" can be decorated with words or images that connect to that part of your identity.
2. Both Ari and Dante label certain things as Mexican or American: ask members to "map" these things onto/around a stick figure to describe what is associated with which culture and why.

## Sparks for Service

1. What other pieces of literature represent multicultural identities? Consider working with a local library to create a book club, a display, or a reading list.
2. Seek out multicultural organizations within your communities, and visit or get in contact to learn how you can support them.

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# Self Discovery



## Introduction

Self-discovery is a huge theme in this novel as Ari and Dante navigate their identities, emotions, and relationships. Through their experiences, they gradually learn who they truly are and what it means to embrace themselves.

## Questions

1. How do Ari and Dante's journeys of self-discovery evolve throughout the novel? What key moments help them shape their understanding of themselves?
2. Ari and Dante differ in how comfortable they are opening up about emotions and identity. How do their differing approaches to self-discovery impact their relationship?
3. What role does solitude and introspection play in Ari's process of figuring out who he is?
4. The book's title suggests that discovering the "secrets of the universe" is connected with self-discovery. What do you think those "secrets" are specifically for Ari and Dante?

## Activities

1. Have members ponder how they have grown to discover parts of themselves. Spend a few minutes to have members write a letter to their past selves. What would they want them to know?
2. Ask members to choose a song that represents a pivotal moment of self-discovery in their own lives. If they feel comfortable, have them share the song and why they chose it.

## Sparks for Service

1. What can communities do to create environments that encourage young people to explore and embrace their identities?
2. What local programs or resources exist to help individuals on their own journeys of self-discovery, and how can book club members support or participate in them?



# Community Resources

Exploring the following websites will provide valuable resources for how to better understand many of the issues addressed in this novel. Chapter members should consider the many ways that researching these sites may inspire individual or chapter actions. Remember: no project and no action is too small! Volunteering time and skills is a valuable resource. Hosting open discussions about issues raised in Book Club is a way of serving individuals, groups, and communities. Service through words is an important part of raising awareness.

## LGBTQ+ Support Organizations

- **PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)**  
<https://pflag.org/>
- **The Trevor Project** <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
- **GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network)**  
<https://www.glsen.org/>

## Mental Health and Youth Counseling Services

- **NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)** <https://www.nami.org/>
- **Crisis Text Line** <https://www.crisistextline.org/volunteer/>
- **Local Youth Counseling Centers**

## Latinx Cultural Organizations

- **Hispanic Heritage Foundation** <https://hispanicheritage.org/>
- **Local Latino Community Organizations**

You might also consult various Literacy Programs and Literacy Councils in your community. Valuable resources can also be found by visiting the websites of some of our Society's sponsors and partners, including:

**League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC):** [lulac.org](http://lulac.org)

**Lambda Literary:** <https://lambdaliterary.org/>

**National Council of Teachers of English/National Center for Literacy Education (NCTE):**

<https://ncte.org/contact-us/>

