

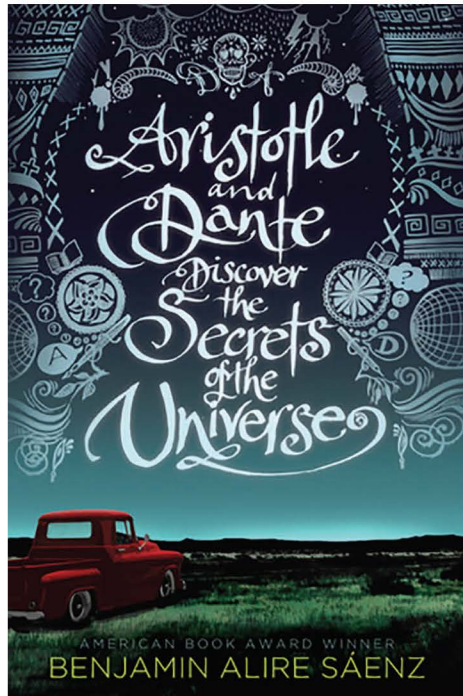
# Reading <sup>with</sup> Relevance

Building INDEPENDENT READERS and THINKERS

A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR

## *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

A novel by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

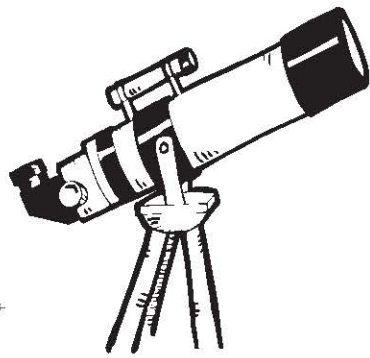


Recommended for:  
Grade Levels  
9th-12th

# A tool to inspire change

This literacy curriculum is constructed around a content-rich novel that builds students' literacy skills and supports their character development and self-confidence. Students are motivated to read because they relate to the strong, diverse, and resilient characters featured in our selected novels and because each session gives them the opportunity to connect what they've read to their own lives.

Developed, field-tested, and refined in our own tutoring and mentoring programs, this Common Core Standards curriculum has inspired persistently low-performing students to engage with literature, make meaning in their lives, and improve their English language arts skills. Now, *Reading with Relevance* is available to help you dig deep into the social, emotional, and academic needs of your students, whether in your classroom, after-school program, or youth development agency!



## Why *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe?*

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* tells the story of Aristotle, a fifteen-year-old boy growing up in Texas in the late 1980s. We chose this novel for its heartfelt depiction of friendship, and for its insight into some powerful social and emotional themes: family, culture, self-discovery, identity, and friendship. This curriculum will help students build connections between Ari's story of self-acceptance and their own experiences growing up.

### This teacher's guide includes:

- A facilitator's guide with tips and resources for implementing the curriculum.
- A map of Common Core Standards addressed through this program.
- Thirteen individual lesson plans, including vocabulary, discussion questions, journal prompts, extension activities, and all handouts.
- Two assessments to monitor student progress throughout the program.
- Regular checkpoints to help teachers assess their students' progress on ELA standards.
- A culminating essay-writing unit.
- An appendix with additional teaching resources and activities to continue exploring this novel.

# Session 1

Pages 1-31



## Vocabulary

**unforgiving** (pg. 6):  
adj., unrelenting, inflexible,  
immovable

**optimist** (pg. 7): n.,  
someone who sees the  
bright side of situations

**precise** (pg. 18): adj.,  
careful about details

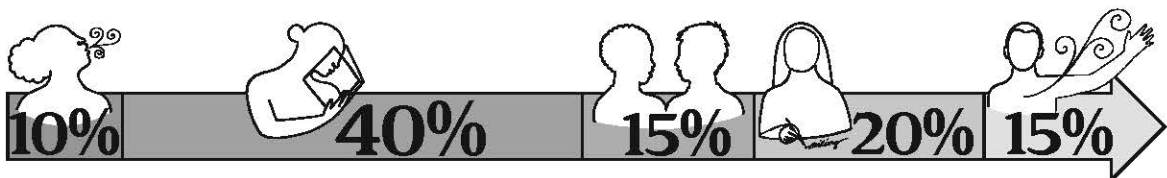
**inscrutable** (pg. 28):  
adj., mysterious

## Today's Themes

The main themes in today's session are **loneliness** and **friendship**. Aristotle describes feelings of intense loneliness at the beginning of the novel. He feels sorry for himself because his mother has more friends than he does; he also wishes he had a more open and affectionate relationship with his father. He begins to feel less lonely when he instantly clicks with Dante, and the two begin forming a friendship. Talk with your students about what loneliness feels like and how they cope with this feeling when they experience it in their own lives. How can friendships and connections with others help us balance our feelings of isolation?

## Story Setup

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is the story of two boys, Aristotle and Dante, who grow and face challenges as friends. It was published in 2012 and written by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. It is set in Texas in 1987.



## During Reading

**Lone Ranger** (pg. 5): A fictional character who first appeared in a radio show. The Lone Ranger fought outlaws in the Wild West.

**William Tell Overture** (pg. 5): a piece of classical music

**Richie Valens** (pg. 6): A singer in the 1950s who was the forefather of the Chicano rock movement and who died suddenly in a plane crash.

**Carlos Santana** (pg. 9): A Mexican-American musician who became famous in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**“the bird”** (pg. 12): an offensive gesture that involves raising the middle finger

**Vietnam** (pg. 14): A country in Asia in which the United States fought a long, bloody war. Many US veterans were changed by the traumatic experiences they had while fighting in the Vietnam War.

**Aristotle and Dante** (pg. 17): Both famous intellects of the past, Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher, and Dante was an Italian poet in the 13th/14th centuries.

## Discussion Questions

- The inscription on the first chapter reads, "The problem with my life was that it was someone else's idea." What does this suggest about the story's narrator?
- Can you relate to Aristotle's feelings of boredom at the beginning of the chapter? How do you keep occupied during your summer break?
- How would you describe Ari's relationship with his mother?
- How does Aristotle feel around other guys his age? Do you always feel like you connect easily with your peers?
- Why does Ari see himself as a "pseudo only child"?
- What was Aristotle's life like before Dante? How do things change after he meets Dante?
- What is Dante's relationship with his father like? How does it differ from Ari's relationship with his father?
- How does Ari describe reading a book of poetry for the first time?

Journal Prompt

FRIENDSHIP

- At the beginning of the chapter, Aristotle describes himself as lonely, miserable, and isolated. However, all of this changes one summer day at the pool, when he meets Dante, and they instantly connect.

**Write about the moment when you first met your closest friend.**

- » What happened? How did you meet this person?
- » What experiences or traits helped you make such a connection?
- » Make a prediction: do you think that Aristotle and Dante will remain close throughout the book?

FAMILY CONNECTION

- When Ari talks about his father he says, "Sometimes I think my father has all these scars. On his heart. In his head. All over."

**What can you infer from this quote about Ari's relationship with his father?**

- » How do you think their connection is different than what Ari would really like to have?
- » How does his father's pain affect Ari?
- » What do you think might help someone heal scars on their mind and heart?

Checkpoint

- Students should demonstrate a command of the standard written conventions of English.
  - » Use capital letters appropriately: to start sentences, when referencing the book title, and when using proper nouns (like the names of characters or places). Remember to end every sentence with a period as well.
  - » For example, "I can always ask my mom or Mrs. Anderson for help."

Extension Activity

As we begin the book, we are introduced to our two main characters: Aristotle and Dante. Today's activity asks your students to begin analyzing the two main characters, including their respective personalities, strengths, and mindsets. Encourage them to explore and consider what the author tells us explicitly about the characters, and what is revealed indirectly through their behaviors, dialogues, and interactions. Throughout the process of reading the novel, students can return to this worksheet to further refine their analysis of these two characters.

Materials:

- » Our Strengths Handout

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



As we begin the book, we are introduced to our two main characters: Aristotle and Dante. In today's activity, you will begin to document what you've learned about their respective personalities, strengths, and mindsets through your reading. In each of the outlines, list the qualities, important events, feelings, and quotes that help you understand their characters. Be sure to consider what the author tells us explicitly about the characters, and what is revealed indirectly through their behaviors, dialogues, and interactions.

## Our Strengths

# Appendix

## *Additional Activities*

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## Get to Know MFI

**Moving Forward Institute** is a nonprofit publisher of social justice educational materials. The organization was created by the founders and staff of Moving Forward Education, a multi-generational tutoring and mentoring organization aimed at fostering academic and emotional success for underserved students in California. Since our founding in 2003, MFE has provided tutoring and mentoring services to thousands of students and has trained hundreds of young adults to enter careers in the educational field. This reading curriculum was developed by our leadership team and its advisory group, including credentialed teachers and college professors. This program has been successfully facilitated throughout California by achieving powerful and measurable results for students and schools. To learn more about our organization, or our research and data, please contact us today.

### Our Purpose

*At Moving Forward Institute, we know that students can be successful learners when their social and emotional needs are met.*

*We empower educators to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students by using culturally-relevant and gender-responsive reading curricula.*

### Training and Professional Development Services

*While lesson plans are designed to be easily facilitated by classroom teachers and after-school staff alike, our in-person training and professional development services will ensure fully effective implementation of the literacy curricula.*

*Additionally, we offer technical support, classroom observation, and program evaluation services to help your program be successful. Contact us for more information about these services!*

### Contact Us

*Contact us today to learn more about how the Moving Forward Institute can support your students and staff!*

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**By Mail:** 1425 Park Ave  
Emeryville, CA 94608

### If your students liked *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* . . .

*...they might love some of our other book selections! We suggest that you check out *The Sun is also a Star*, *The Hate U Give*, or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Please visit our website today to browse our full selection of socially and emotionally rich novel-based curricula!*