

Aristotle, dante and the human experience

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Life is something that seems to start and end simultaneously in one's teens, as the optimism of your childhood comes clashing with the newfound anxieties of the future. And this is inevitable- teenagers nowadays are forced to lose their individuality in order to fit into the workforces of today's societies, as jobs and school and even parents try to compact them into a single working entity. The human existence then becomes exhausting and unbearable. That being said, adolescence teaches one how to combat the struggles in their lives through expressing oneself freely through what they love and who they are despite an entire world forcing each and every one of its citizens to conform to its liking, and rather than compacting oneself, vulnerability and emotions are key. This is a concept present in the coming of age novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by the Mexican/American author Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

Through the trials and tribulations of the two protagonists in this novel, they come to a conclusion that even if there is a hardship in one's lives, through love, creative expression, and being able to find comfort with vulnerability rather than hiding from it, the human experience is one worth living.

Firstly, there is love. Through the bond that Ari and Dante share, they intertwine, and Ari discovers a form of newfound joy in his own life that he has not had before through love. In short, Ari learns how to love and be loved, mostly through Dante, but also through his trials and tribulations in his family life and embracing his sexuality. Love is a HUGE part of this book. Susie, a friend of Ari's who decides to drive to the desert with him to get drunk, asks him explicitly, " Do you think, Ari, that love has anything to do with the secrets of the universe (Saenz, 231)." The secrets of the universe in

this book are like the secrets of the human experience, and love is a fundamental part of it. Of course, Aristotle at the beginning of the book has trouble with feeling or reciprocating love, and the love he does find is often shallow. His first kiss was with a girl named Ileana who was pretty much dating a gang leader...and pregnant. However, Dante makes him question both his sexuality and his views on romantic love, as well as everything else in his life. In reality “[He] love[s] him more than [he] can bear (Saenz, 348).” Near the end of the book, he slowly learns to how to feel love, as he realizes that all this time he’s been in love with Dante, as he states, “ All of the answers had always been so close and yet I had always fought them without even knowing it. From the minute I’d met Dante, I had fallen in love with him. I just didn’t let myself know it, think it, feel it (Saenz, 358).” At the end of the book, he gladly declares “ How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana? (Saenz)”, and Aristotle’s life becomes more vibrant and good through the love he reciprocates with Dante. Love is a huge theme in this entire book, correlating with the bond of Ari and Dante (both their friendship and their romance) as well as the terror and wonders of falling in love. Love is a fundamental part of the human experience, and it is both the greatest enemy and wisest mentor one can ever have. In reality, everybody needs love, not just to feel emotional well being but to learn and grow and transform from.

Secondly, Dante is a very expressive and creative person, as he’s always trying to live his life, in which it helps him go through the troubles he faces in his own life. He cries when birds die, he loves the arts and writing, despite the fact he has many inner demons, one being his fear of what his parents

will think of his sexuality. Ari finds this somewhat absurd, as he describes him: “ He was funny and focused and fierce. I mean the guy could be fierce. And there wasn’t anything mean about him. I didn’t understand how you could live in a mean world and not have any of that meanness rub off on you. How could a guy live without some meanness (Saenz, 19)?” His quirkiness rubs on others easily, including Ari. He charms him through his whimsicalness, as well as his intent to discover the secrets of the universe: [“ What are you going to do with all those secrets, Dante?” “ I’ll know what to do with them,” he said.

“ Maybe change the world.” (Saenz, 43)] Dante himself loves life, despite its cruelty towards its subjects. Aristotle goes to even think of Dantes’ face as “.... a map of the world. A world without any darkness (Saenz, 56)” Creativity and expression helps one be their own person, and often get by in life, as if it were little luminous lights, like how Dante does. By being able to show oneself to the world, their life will become more worthwhile. Of course, this is a difficult thing to do, since conformity and inner demons make it almost impossible for one to be themselves. But sometimes, creativity is all one has.

Finally, Ari and Dante, and their families all make their lives worthwhile by showing vulnerability rather than trying to hide it, which at first is a difficult thing to accomplish. One present theme in this book is how “ We all fight our own private wars (Saenz, 358).” These themes of inner trauma and vulnerability are mostly about men, though it’s not entirely exclusive to them. Aristotle in particular has issues trying to show his vulnerability due to the expectations of his Mexican-American heritage, as well as the

expectations of being a man in general. He also lives with ghosts he has yet to confront: “ I thought that maybe there were ghosts inside of me that I hadn’t even met yet. They were there. Lying in wait (Saenz, 93)” Dante comes into his life, and Aristotle starts to feel more vulnerable, even stating that “ I wanted to tell them that he was the first human being aside from my mother who had ever made me want to talk about the things that scared me (Saenz, Page 308).” He starts to have dreams about rain and about birds once he meets Dante, symbolic of his repressed emotions and vulnerability that keeps locked away most of the time. Ari learning how to be vulnerable is not just about his emotions and inner demons, however. It’s also about him coming to terms with his sexuality. Again this has a lot to do with Dante, but Ari’s lack of awareness of his own vulnerabilities makes it hard for him to understand that he has fallen in love with another boy: “ From the minute I’d met Dante, I had fallen in love with him. I just didn’t let myself know it, think it, feel it (Saenz, 358).” Ari starts to feel comfort in his sexuality, thus more emotional stability, realizing that ,“ There are worse things in the world than a boy who likes to kiss other boys (Saenz, 307)”.

In Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, the two protagonists come to an understanding that the human experience is something worthwhile, but only if one is able to love and be loved in return, therefore being able to express themselves and also show their vulnerabilities so one can truly live their life to the fullest. Of course, in society like that of today those things are hard to come by as people are forced to hide their emotions and often their inner selves, so the human experience even now has been troublesome because of the society forced

upon them, which is part of the emotions that stir to cause people to contemplate things like suicide and self-harm. Of course, however, life is a miracle, and every life on this earth needs to feel love and happiness, and the human experience is best lived once one finds something worthwhile, like love, or family, or forgiveness, or just simply the secrets of the universe that have yet to be found.