



Aristotle and Dante

Discover the Secrets of the Universe

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe: **A GLSEN Discussion Guide for Students and Youth Groups**

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe (2023) **Rated PG-13**

Mexican-American teenagers Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana explore their friendship while struggling with racial and ethnic identity, sexuality and family relationships in 1987 in El Paso, Texas.

HOW TO UTILIZE ARISTOTLE AND DANTE TO CREATE DISCUSSION

Whether you loved the book or the 2023 film, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a brilliant piece about the power of friendship, culture, family, gender, prejudice, love, and more. Host a watch-party or film showing for your GSA, diversity group, leadership program, film club, or other youth group, using this document to help guide a productive conversation.

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

- Preview this guide before using, selecting questions that are most relevant for your group, keeping in mind the identities, experiences, and comfort levels of those in the discussion circle.
- Before starting discussion, go over group norms and guidelines to ensure every student feels their voice is heard and valued.
- Keep track of time so you can ask questions from a variety of themes and be able to reflect on group ideas at the end!



MASCULINITY AND EMOTIONAL HONESTY

The film explores traditional expectations of masculinity through Ari's stoic exterior, as he contends with uncontrollable anger, apathy, a desire for isolation, and general emotional inaccessibility. By contrast, Dante is emotionally expressive, kind, and thoughtful, contributing to another take on what masculinity could mean. Aristotle and Dante makes readers confront truths about what authenticity means in the context of manhood.

1. In the beginning of the movie, Ari said that he was "afraid that to be a man, I would have to hurt other boys to prove something." How does his view on violence change throughout the film?
2. Ari described his father as "trapped in his own silence." Do you think Ari is similar or different? How does Ari's isolation contribute to his meaning of masculinity?
 - Does Ari choose his isolation or is it forced upon him by those around him? How about Dante?
3. Ari's brother was incarcerated for queerphobic violence. Can you think of any examples of toxic masculinity leading to violence in the real world?
4. When Dante comes out, when Dante kisses him, and when his aunt dies, Ari is full of complex feelings that turn into uncontrollable anger. Why does Ari try to suppress his feelings?
 - In what situations is anger a healthy response? And in which situations is it unhealthy?

RACE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

This story dives into the boys' Mexican-American heritage, with an emphasis on the navigation of cultural belonging and personal authenticity.



1. The film is bilingual, featuring Spanish and English dialogue. What does the Spanish language integration show about their Mexican-American identity?
2. How do the boys navigate their Mexican-American and queer identities?
 - Can you find any examples of their cultural background impacting their coming out journey?
3. How does the Mexican “macho” man stereotype complicate their views of masculinity?
4. Dante reveals that he doesn’t feel like a “real” Mexican because of his appearance and inability to speak fluent Spanish. What does it mean to be part of a culture? Is it something you are born with or something you have to actively participate in creating?

FAMILY, SECRETS, AND ACCEPTANCE

Ari struggles with shame around his brother’s incarceration, especially with his family’s complete silence on the subject. Meanwhile, Dante’s family is warm, nurturing, and open, providing Ari a sense of emotional safety and familial belonging.

1. How do the parenting styles of the Mendozas and Quintanas differ? How did the parenting style impact Ari and Dante’s personalities?
2. Dante refuses to live with a secret, and tells Ari that he wants to come out to his parents as soon as he can. Why does Dante hate secrets so much?
 - How does Ari deal with secrets?
3. How does Ari deal with the painful information about the reason behind his brother’s incarceration?
 - Do you think Ari’s parents were right to keep the secret or should they have been more transparent about it to their son?



FRIENDSHIP

A beautiful friendship between Ari and Dante turns into something romantic throughout the film. The boys are bonded through their sense of loyalty and the intellectual curiosity that ties them together.

1. The pair's friendship begins with Dante teaching Ari how to swim. In the water, Dante holds Ari in the water and tells him to put away his fears and to "trust me." How does trust play a role in Ari and Dante's friendship? Come up with some examples.
2. Ari doesn't have many friends, and tells Dante he doesn't feel the need to make more. Why do you think he let Dante into his life? How was Dante special?
3. Ari and Dante's friendship turns into love. Do you think there was a turning point where friendship turned romantic, or was it more gradual?
 - What are some qualities of a good friendship that translate well into a romantic relationship?
4. Male friendship is often uncommon in media depictions. Why do you think this is?
 - a. What are some other examples of male friendship in books, movies, or TV?

ART, POETRY, AND LITERATURE AS SELF-EXPLORATION

The film highlights the importance of art in Ari and Dante's journey of discovering pieces of themselves and the world around them, by highlighting the works of Théodore Géricault, William Carlos Williams, and José Clemente Orozco, among others. Ari and Dante's shared curiosity about intellectual and artistic pursuits develops their bond.



1. Ari's dad was enraptured by the book of Mexican-American art. Do you have an example of a book, movie, or piece of art that changed you in some way or helped you understand a piece of your identity? Discuss.
2. Dante gave Ari his sketchbook before moving away to Chicago. Why was it so vulnerable for him to share his art with Ari?
 - Looking at the sketches, Ari described Dante's art as "honest." What do you think he meant by this?
3. How is poetry different from other types of literature? Dante saw magic in poetry, why do you think that was?
4. Debate: Which forms of art do you think are the most powerful? Why?

GRAPPLING WITH HOMOPHOBIA AND THE AIDS CRISIS

Aristotle and Dante is historical fiction, set in El Paso, Texas during the 1980s, and positioned against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis. It includes ACT UP news coverage, touches on the epidemic, and even narrates Dante's horrific homophobia-fueled attack. The film explores issues of personal and societal prejudice as perpetuating factors of violence.

1. Why didn't Dante try and run away from the homophobes who wanted to hurt him? Was he proving a point about the bravery of queer people or was he just making a foolish decision.
2. How do you think stereotypes about and prejudices against gay people in the 1980s made it harder for gay kids to discover themselves and come out?
3. Why did Dante face more bullying than Ari?
 - How does Ari attempt to protect Dante? Was he justified in turning to violence?
4. Has public perception of the LGBTQ+ community gotten better or worse? Discuss.
 - How can we continue working to make the world a more inclusive place for queer youth?



SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

Coming Out

Now more than ever, we live in a very uncertain world for LGBTQ+ youth, and coming to terms with your gender and sexuality might be not only confusing, but also potentially fraught with fears of social repercussion. Here, we've compiled a list of resources that might be helpful. Everyone's story is unique-- feel free to use the resources that feel relevant for you.

Gender Terminology

An important resource for all GSAs and youth groups, this accessible guide on gender terminology will help create inclusive spaces for all students.

Starting a GSA

If you want to make your community a more inclusive place, consider starting a GSA for queer students to develop community and discuss important topics related to LGBTQ+ life. Explore these resources to help with planning and running this project.

OTHER MOVIE/TV DISCUSSION GUIDES

If you enjoyed this movie discussion activity, consider making film screenings and discussions a recurring event! Here you can find some other queer-themed movie/ TV discussion guides for your youth group.

Love, Simon (2018)

Heartstopper (2024)

Waiting on more movie curricula? Learn more about GLSEN and stay up-to-date on our work by following us on social media: @GLSEN on Facebook and Instagram, and @GLSEN_National on TikTok!