

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe Study Guide

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Saenz

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Plot Summary

The narrative, as recounted by by protagonist Aristotle (Ari), begins in summer. Fifteen year old Ari, in spite of being unable to swim, visits a nearby pool in his hometown of El Paso, Texas. There he meets another fifteen year old, the talkative Dante, who teaches Ari to swim and, along the way, becomes what Ari describes as his first real friend.

As the friendship between Ari and Dante deepens, they become friends with each other's parents; discover shared interests and different attitudes; and begin to awaken to feelings for each other that go beyond friendship, an intimacy with which Dante is far more comfortable and open than Ari. At one point, an encounter with a skidding car results in Ari saving Dante's life, but suffering two broken legs in the process. Dante and his parents express deep gratitude but Ari, who tends to be uncomfortable with emotion (both his and other people's) brushes off their thanks. Meanwhile, as an incentive towards recovery, Ari's father buys him a truck and, after the casts on his legs are removed, Ari (after celebrating his sixteenth birthday) learns to drive, and revels in his new freedom. Around this time, he also discovers a sealed envelope with the name of his brother (who is in prison and who is never spoken about) on it.

That fall, Dante accompanies his parents on a move to Chicago: his father, a university professor, is filling a short term contract. In his narration, Ari describes his efforts to fill his time with schoolwork, with fantasies about the beautiful Ileana, with taking care of his truck, and with taking care of his new dog, a stray mutt that attaches herself to him while he is strolling past Dante's home. Ari also answers some of Dante's letters, but not all: Dante is just as talkative on paper as he is in person, his letters chatting about his experiments with kissing, with drugs/alcohol/partying, and with art. Dante's openness and curiosity, particularly when it comes to physical and/or sexual matters, tend to make Ari uncomfortable, and he takes refuge in brooding more deeply about his brother.

The second half of Dante's year of absence passes quickly. As summer returns, so does Dante, and he and Ari resume their friendship, although not quite as easily as before: Dante is becoming increasingly comfortable with his emerging same-sex attractions, an aspect of his friend's character that makes Ari uneasy. His affection and protectiveness towards Dante overcome that unease, however, when Dante is attacked after being found kissing another boy. While Dante recovers in hospital, a blindly furious Ari takes revenge on the attacker, beating him up in turn.

Ari escapes serious consequences for his actions, but is forced by his parents to face some uncomfortable truths: his older brother went to prison for giving in to the same sort of violent feelings as Ari did in avenging Dante. Ari tearfully assures them that he is not like his brother, and will do everything in his power to avoid the same fate. Ari's parents also reveal their belief that he has long been in love with Dante and assure him of their support and love. Shortly afterwards, Ari comes to accept that they're correct, and confesses his feelings to Dante. The two kiss, and spend a romantic evening lying in the back of Ari's truck, looking up into the night sky, now knowing a few more of the secrets of the universe.



Section 1 - The Different Rules of Summer

Summary

Chapters 1 through 4 – On a morning when first person narrator Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza wakes up feeling unhappy that nothing in his life has changed from the day before (even though he went to sleep wanting it to), and after a breakfast conversation with his wise and sensitive mother, Ari goes to the local swimming pool. Narration of his walk includes descriptions of what he sees as his lonely family situation: twin sisters twelve years older, an older brother in prison, and a father suffering with the aftermath of serving in the Vietnam War. Narration also describes how he faces down a pack of verbally abusive bullies, and how, at the pool, he feels uncomfortable around other men, commenting that he doesn't seem to feel the same way they do about a lot of things, particularly girls. As he goes out to the pool, another boy about the same age (fifteen) picks up on Ari's discomfort with swimming and offers to teach him. To Ari's surprise (because he tries to be solitary around other people), he agrees, and finds himself really enjoying both the instruction and the company of his teacher, who gives his name as Dant. Initially, the two of them bond over the strangeness of their respective names, while as the months of summer pass, they bond further over their similar / different tastes in literature and comic books, and their imaginings of what's going on in other people's lives (particularly when they spend hours at a time riding the bus and people-watching). Ari's narration also refers to how difficult he finds it to communicate with his father; how he has a few friendships (including with a couple of girls, Gina and Susie); and how he was happy to feel "mostly invisible" ... until he met Dante. Finally, Ari's narration also gives this first section its title, as he describes how the "rules of summer" in terms of what to wear, what to do, what to be, are different (i.e. freer) from the rules during the rest of the year.

Chapters 5 through 10 – When Dante introduces him to his parents, Ari is surprised to notice how open and friendly Dante's relationship with his father is, especially when contrasted with his own relationship with his silent, war-veteran dad. Ari is particularly intrigued by Dante's habit of affectionately kissing both his parents, and wonders what it would be like to kiss his dad. Over the days and weeks, Ari's and Dante's friendship deepens as they spend time in each other's bedrooms (Ari admiring Dante's organizational skills and intellect, Dante commenting on how empty Ari's bedroom seems), and as they talk about how they each feel about being Mexican (Dante seems as uncomfortable being around other Mexicans as Ari is around other boys). One night, Dante and his family take Ari up to the top of the hill where they look through Dante's telescope. While looking at the stars, Ari has a powerful moment of realization, becoming aware (apparently for the first time) that he has value as a person.

Chapters 11 and 12 – Dante and Ari discuss why Dante doesn't like wearing shoes. He says that they're unnatural and that he feels freer without them, something that gets him



into arguments with his Mexican mother, who thinks that him going without shoes makes him look like a “poor Mexican” which, Dante suggests, is something she hates. He then sets up an elaborate, detailed game involving himself and Ari throwing their shoes as far as they can and measuring the distance. Dante throws furthest most often, but Ari has the furthest single throw. Some time later, Ari and Dante confront a pair of bullying teens who have shot and killed a bird with a pellet gun. Ari’s response is to face down and out bully the bullies, while Dante’s response is to try to get them to have concern for the bird. After Ari has chased the bullies off, Dante tearfully asks for his help in burying the bird. While the bird is being placed into the ground, Ari reflects on the differences in their responses, and what it says about their personalities (see Quote 5). When he goes home, he reflects on those differences even further: “...it seemed to me that Dante’s face was a map of the world. A world without any darkness. Wow, a world without darkness. How beautiful was that?”

Analysis

This initial section of the novel introduces several of the book’s key elements: its central characters (Ari and Dante) and their relationship; ways in which secondary relationships (with parents, with friends, and in Ari’s case with siblings) influence those main relationships; and a number of the book’s key metaphors and images. These include the references to birds (which recur as a motif of freedom and/or vulnerability throughout the story, particularly when associated with Dante); the references to kissing (a manifestation of emotional vulnerability and intimacy that simultaneously troubles and intrigues Ari here and on several other occasions throughout the narrative); and, in the section’s concluding lines, its reference to beauty. As noted in “Symbols and Symbolism,” Ari’s narration frequently refers to beauty and/or beautiful things. This tends to suggest and/or imply, rather than state outright, that on some level, Ari is on a search for those sorts of things in his life. Here it’s important to note that each of the above elements, as manifest here, also functions as foreshadowing of later significant appearances of the same symbols / motifs later in the story.

Other important pieces of foreshadowing in this section include the incident of the wounded bird, which foreshadows two important points: the discovery of another wounded bird in a subsequent section, which results in painful consequences for Ari and which metaphorically foreshadows important events that trigger the novel’s climax; and the encounter with the bullies, which foreshadows an occasion late in the narrative in which Ari goes further than verbal threats, and actually erupts into physical violence when faced with bullying behavior. Meanwhile, the reference to Ari and Dante looking into the mysteries of the sky is foreshadowing of scenes later in the narrative (including its conclusion) in which looking outward into the universe (perhaps for some of the “secrets” referenced in the title) leads both friends, but particularly Ari, to look inward at the secrets in themselves (a development in the novel’s thematic interest in secrets). Then there are the references to Ari’s brother, whose absence (and the mystery around that absence) play defining roles in many of Ari’s decisions and choices, particularly during the emotional climax of the piece (and also develop the novel’s theme of the power of secrets). Finally, Ari’s comments about Dante’s face foreshadow later



developments in the novel as Ari becomes increasingly aware of, and open to, his feelings of attraction to his friend.

The reference to Ari's dad being a veteran of the Vietnam War is important to note, as there is a history of many veterans of that war having similar troubles: difficulty expressing emotions, difficulty communicating at all, and a sense of profound inner suffering. In more contemporary terms and understanding, Ari's dad seems to be suffering from what today would be called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, commonly discussed in relationship to the experiences of military veterans coming home from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Finally, this section introduces, and begins to develop, several of the novel's themes. In terms of the central theme, coming of age, the events of this section portray Ari and Dante at the beginning of that particular journey of transformation: here they are still mostly children, but "come of age" (i.e. mature into young men) as the story progresses. Two of the sub-themes associated with this theme (discovering self and discovering family) also begin to develop in this section, while the book's thematic exploration of the power of secrets manifest in relationship to the mysterious presence / absence (which continue throughout the story) of Ari's brother. Finally, the book's thematic exploration of cultural identity, and its connection to the coming-of-age experience, begins here with the first of several references, sometimes joking / sometimes ironic / sometimes pointed about what it means to be Mexican.

Discussion Question 1

What is your experience of having different "rules of summer"? How do things change in your home / life when summer arrives?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Dante's mother hates being thought of as a "poor Mexican"?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ari thinks of Dante's face as representing "a world without darkness"? What is it about Dante's reaction to the bird that makes Ari react to him in that way?

Vocabulary

retro, eternal, optimist, endure, accessible, precise, inscrutable, systematic, occurrence, agnostic, compliment, crucifix, premise, lunatic, javelin, establish, flinch, obscenity, pacifist, oleander



Section 2 - Sparrows Falling from the Sky

Summary

Chapters 1 through 5 – The day after burying the dead bird, Ari comes down with a severe fever that sends him to bed and gives him vivid, intensely emotional dreams in which he keeps reaching for his father, for his imprisoned brother, and for Dante. He occasionally wakes to find his father holding him, at one point confessing that he too has bad dreams. This glimpse of his father's inner life makes Ari strangely happy. He also dreams about millions of sparrows falling from the sky, an image that recurs to him when Dante comes for a visit and reads him some of his poetry. At the same time, Ari reveals he's having bad dreams, but refuses to tell Dante what they're about. On that same visit, Dante (who admits that he plans to become an artist) draws a sketch of Ari that, in narration, Ari says has a lot of his (Ari's) feelings of loneliness in it. Ari asks to see more sketches, but Dante refuses, commenting that it's for the same reason that he doesn't want to show Ari the sketches in the same way as Ari doesn't want to tell Dante about his dreams. During another dream of the sparrows, Ari feels as though it's him killing them.

Chapters 6 through 10– As his recovery and his dreams continue, Ari reflects on his relationship with his much older sisters (who, he says, treat him more like a son than a brother) and on his brother, whom he longs to get to know. When he tells Dante about his siblings, Dante admits he's envious, revealing how much he feels like a “freak” when he's with his very Mexican family. During narration, Ari also reveals that he writes in a journal, which he says helps him feel like someone, and that he's aware he's named after both his grandfather and an ancient Greek philosopher, which he says makes him feel as though everyone wants something from him. During a conversation with his mother about his father, Ari realizes how much she loves them both, how much she sacrificed to make her life good, and how much a person (as opposed to “just” a parent) she really is. Later, he reads old entries in his journal (in which he reflects with disgust and self-loathing on the things puberty is doing to his body) and writes new ones, trying to bring order to his life in the same way as Dante brings order to his bedroom. The last entry in the journal suggests that Ari worries that if Dante knew who he really was, Dante wouldn't want to be his friend.

Chapters 11 and 12 – Ari's mother takes him to see a doctor to find out if there was / is anything more wrong with him than the flu. While they're waiting, conversation turns to Dante's dad, a university professor, with Ari's Mexican mother commenting (with some anger) that she never had a Mexican teacher once in all her schooling. When the doctor says that Ari is fine and that he just suffered a severe flu, Ari is both angry and relieved. When he goes to the pool with Dante, however, he (Ari) is too weak to swim for long, so he just watches Dante. Later, after walking home in the rain (and getting a mild scolding from Dante's dad for not staying dry), Dante says that he and Ari have to talk, and takes



Ari for a barefoot walk (their soaked shoes are still drying). After avoiding the issue he wants to bring up, eventually reveals that he and his family will be leaving for a year so that Mr. Mendoza can take a teaching position at another university. As he's processing that information, Ari notices a wounded bird in the middle of the street. As Dante goes to pick it up, Ari also notices an oncoming car sliding on the rain-slick street. The last thing he remembers is screaming Dante's name.

Analysis

Several significant images and/or motifs (repeated images) either return or are introduced in this section. Returning images include the references to birds, and specifically to sparrows (which, here as elsewhere in the novel, represent vulnerability); and also the reference to shoeless-ness, which represents freedom. New images introduced here include rain (which shows up throughout the book as an evocation of the intimacy and connection between Ari and Dante – see “Discussion Question 1”) and Ari's journal (which symbolizes Ari's relationship with himself, both drawing close and avoiding). Here it's important to note that Ari's journal and his dreams are simultaneously similar and different in their intent, and in their relationship to Ari's experience – see “Discussion Question 2”.

Other important elements in this section include the slowly emerging connection between Ari and his father (which explores the narrative's themes of discovering family and the power of secrets, specifically those of Ari's dad); various references to aspects of being Mexican (which explore and/or manifest the narrative's thematic interest in discovering and/or exploring cultural identity); and the reference to Ari's discovery that there's more to his mom and her life than he originally thought. This is one of the novel's several explorations of the theme of “Discovering Family,” a sub-theme of the main “Coming of Age” theme.

Significant foreshadowings in this section include the first of several appearances (in the novel) by Dante's sketchpad (which, as the narrative progresses, takes on increasing significance in relationship to how the feelings of the two friends develop) and the section's concluding moments, which simultaneously echo moments at the beginning of the chapter (in which Ari's dreams include screaming Dante's name) and forthcoming events (which define much of the action, and many of the relationships, in the following section).

Finally, there is a reference in this section to Ari's name – specifically, his being named after a famous philosopher – specifically, the ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle. It's important to note that Dante also shares his name with a famous person – the Italian novelist Dante Alighieri. For further consideration of the characters' names and their implications, see “Homework Help 1.”



Discussion Question 1

As noted in the analysis for this section and in “Symbols and Symbolism”, rain is, throughout the narrative, a symbol of the intimacy and closeness between Dante and Ari. In what ways does rain, and therefore that intimacy, show up with both positive and negative aspects in this section?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways are Ari’s journal and his dreams similar in relationship to his inner life? In what ways are they different?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ari is afraid of Dante knowing who he truly is? What is it about Ari’s character that you think he is afraid of revealing?

Vocabulary

equilibrium, predicament, fascist, accusation, arrogant, initiate



Section 3 - The End of Summer

Summary

Chapters 1 through 5 – Ari wakes up in the hospital with two broken legs and a broken left arm. He learns from his (extremely relieved) parents that as the skidding car (last seen at the end of the previous section) approached, he pushed Dante out of the way, and that Dante has been waiting in the hospital room for the 36 hours since Ari came in. When Ari asks what happened to the wounded bird, his parents can't tell him – and later, when a tearful Dante visits, Ari fails to ask him too, but comments in narration on how much he wants to know what became of it. A succession of visitors follows – Ari's surgeon (who tries to convince Ari that he's a hero for saving his friend's life) and Dante's parents (who are tender and grateful, Dante's mother saying that she will love him forever). Ari gruffly refuses to accept any compliments. There are also several visits from Dante, who leaves behind his sketchpad for Ari to look at. Ari, however, suddenly feels a wave of intense resentment towards his friend, and throws the sketchpad against the wall. Ari's mother walks in at that moment, and wants to know what's going on. When Ari doesn't explain, she tells him it's not good to keep all his feelings bottled up, and he tells her that he'll talk about what's going on with him if she talks about his brother. She refuses and leaves. Meanwhile, Ari's father keeps him company more quietly, both of them reading books brought by Dante (who, it turns out, has caught the same flu as Ari had and is staying away). He and Ari talk on the phone, though, and Ari makes some rules for future conversations: no talking about the accident, no gratitude, no more crying. Dante agrees. Eventually, Ari is sent home, looking for birds as he goes.

Chapters 6 through 11 – Ari's recovery continues at home. His mother gives him sponge baths and shaves him, he and his dad read together, and Dante comes by to visit, reading aloud to Ari. Ari comments in narration that he keeps Dante's sketchpad under the bed and doesn't look at it. At one point, Dante gets permission from Ari's mom to give him a sponge bath, and Ari (still feeling angry about the sketchpad and about his situation in general) agrees, keeping his eyes closed the entire time. When the bath is finished, however, he opens his eyes and finds Dante weeping. Dante leaves soon afterwards. Time passes: Ari's recovery continues, plans are made for him to go back to school, there is still silence about his brother and still increasing anger in Ari at his helplessness, and Dante's sketchpad remains under Ari's bed. Ari writes in his journal about how much he's looking forward to Dante leaving, but then at the end of the summer, shortly before Dante and his family are due to leave, Ari has a change of heart. One night while Dante is visiting, he confesses that art and Ari are the only things he loves. This leaves Ari to comment that he and Dante are very different people, and when Dante asks whether Ari hates him, Ari realizes that he doesn't (see Quote 8). A couple of days later, the day before Dante and his family go, the two families get together. While their mothers cook and their fathers talk politics, Ari confesses to Dante that he hasn't looked at the sketchbook. Dante fetches it, and they look at it together, Ari realizing that Dante's sketches are showing him a part of himself he never really knew



was there. Dante promises to write and Ari promises to write back, although confessing in narration that he wasn't sure he actually would. After Dante and his family leave, it starts to rain, and Ari has an image of Dante "standing in the rain holding a bird with a broken wing. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or not. What if he'd lost his smile?" At that thought, Ari finds himself holding back tears. And feeling like he was the saddest boy in the universe: "Summer had come and gone. And the world was ending."

Analysis

The situation at the beginning of this section (the revelation of what happened in the moments after the end of the previous section) is simultaneously a powerful beginning to this section and an important foreshadowing of events in the book's final section, in which Ari's parents confront him with what they see as the truth of what Ari's actions (in saving Dante's life). Other foreshadowings include the reference to Ari keeping his feelings bottled up (another foreshadowing of the final section, in which all the feelings Ari has been keeping to himself are released) and the reference to writing letters, which foreshadows both the events and the style of the following section.

Other important elements in this section of the book include the juxtaposition of Ari's insights about the sketchpad and Dante giving Ari a sponge bath, both of which suggest a growing, deepening intimacy and/or sense of connection, at least on Dante's part – an intimacy that Ari seems determined to ignore. There are also further references to Ari's brother (which keeps both the thematically significant idea of the secrets and what happened alive in both Ari and the reader), and the juxtaposition of three of the book's key images: the contents of the sketchbook, rain, and wounded birds. All three evoke / represent similar aspects of Ari's personality and experience – love and vulnerability. This interpretation of these three images is further supported by Ari's comments at the end of the section, which are in fact an ironic foreshadowing of events in the following section, in which Ari attempts to distance himself from Dante and from his (Ari's) feelings for him.

Then there are the references to Ari's anger. His realization that he isn't truly angry at Dante aside (a situation which, as the narrative reveals, is only temporary), experiences of anger, here and later in the narrative prove to be catalytic and/or transformative when it comes to Ari's thematically significant experiences of coming of age through getting to know himself.

Ultimately, the most significant element of this section has to do with the increasingly complicated mix of feelings Ari experiences in relation to Dante. Ambivalently and simultaneously angry and affectionate, resentful and vulnerable, Ari is, at the almost exact mid-point of his story (at least in terms of page count) – at the center of a storm of transformative emotions that propels him into some extreme, unexpected actions in the following sections but which eventually resolve into profound, significant personal truths following the book's climax.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the significance of Ari never finding out what happened to the wounded bird? Why do you think he's looking for birds on his way home from the hospital?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the ways in which the various characters (including, but not limited to, Ari, Dante, and their parents) are "wounded birds" in this section.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ari demands, at this particular point in the story, that his mother tell him about his brother? What is the relationship, do you think, between what he says to her and what she said to him just moments before?

Vocabulary

neurologist, gringo, paraplegic, decency, inconsistent, passive, methodical, porcelain, talkative, invalid (n.), claustrophobic, spontaneous



Section 4 - Letters on a Page, Part 1

Summary

Chapters 1 through 5 - When Ari returns to school he is peppered by questions from students (particularly his childhood friend Gina) and teachers (particularly new teacher Mr. Blocker) alike. He finds both sorts of questions irritating, particularly those from Mr. Blocker who, Ari comments, asks those kind of first day getting-to-know you questions that he hates. When he asks his mom, who is also a teacher, whether she does that sort of thing, she says she does, telling him she wants to get to know her students as people. On the second day of school, Ari is surprised when an unknown girl named Ileana comes up and signs one of the casts on his legs. He is surprised by the strength of his feelings for her (see "Quote 9").

Chapters 6 through 12 – On his sixteenth birthday, Ari is given a truck by his father, and he (Ari) looks forward to driving lessons as soon as the casts are off his legs and he's able to walk again. He continues to think about Ileana even while he's not trying to think about Dante (which, Ari comments in narration, makes him feel as sad as thinking about his brother), and has a bad dream in which he is driving his truck and hits Dante because he (Ari) is thinking about Ileana instead of watching the road. Meanwhile, Ari gets a couple of letters from Dante, in which Dante describes his life in Chicago, comments that there are so many Mexicans there that it's like they're flocks of sparrows, and primarily his experiments with alcohol, drugs (marijuana), partying, and girls. Dante also talks about how he thinks often about Ari, which leads Ari feel even guiltier about thinking so much about Ileana – who, he decides, he is going to kiss in the same way as Dante kissed a girl at a party. He also wonders a great deal about the meaning of his dreams, not just about Dante about also about his brother. He comments in narration that he doesn't know what his brother's crime actually was. He resolves to find out everything he can about his brother, commenting in narration that he knows Dante could help but that he's going to do this on his own.

Chapters 13 through – 18 – Ari gets another letter from Dante, in which he (Dante) refers to a couple of paintings he sees when he goes to the Art Institute of Chicago – one that he says makes him think of Ari, the another one ("The Raft of he Medusa") that he says is like a novel. He says he misses Ari, and then promises to never bring it up again. Meanwhile, Ari continues his search (at the library) for information about his brother and for Ileana (eventually tracking down her locker and leaving her a note). He also gets a job at a burger place called "The Charcoaler" to earn some money to pay for improvements to his truck, starts driving lessons with his father (who begins to talk, very occasionally, about his post-Vietnam life), and adopts a stray dog (Legs) whom his father describes as "beautiful" and who finds him one day when he's sitting outside Dante's house. Ari also writes his first letter to Dante, in which he describes finally being able to walk again; finding Legs; his truck (which he describes as "a real Mexican truck") because of its color, size, and make; and learning about his dad's dreams. He also apologizes for not writing more, saying that he's doing his best and struggling to find the



right way to express his complicated feelings. The chapter concludes with Ari summing up his life (which now includes a routine of basement weightlifting), his quest to kiss Ileana, and his realizations that while he really likes writing, he can't get into art at all.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section has more to do with style than with content – specifically, the style in which its various chapters are written. Here there are two important elements: length (in that many chapters are extremely short, ranging from a paragraph to a few lines of dialogue to a few pages) and point of view. This is the one section in the book in which point of view shifts away from protagonist Ari (who narrates almost the entire work) and to antagonist Dante – specifically, to the letters he writes. This section is the only section in the narrative in which Dante's words are revealed to the reader unfiltered: in the rest of the story, which is ostensibly being told by Ari, Dante's words and actions emerge through his (Ari's) perspective. Dante's letters are Dante unfiltered, and as such, the reader gets a clear, vivid sense of who he is and what he's thinking and feeling.

Other important points to note include the introduction of three important female characters – or rather, the introductions of two (Ileana, who becomes an important figure in Ari's exploration of sexuality, and Legs, who becomes an important symbol / trigger of unconditional affection in Ari and those around him) and the re-introduction of another. This is Gina, who was mentioned in passing earlier but who becomes more important in this and the forthcoming sections in that she both directly and indirectly pushes Ari to explore his sexuality. Then there is the introduction of Ari's truck, which represents both freedom and maturity, both of which he explores frequently later in the narrative, perhaps most significantly at its conclusion. Freedom is also represented, actively and metaphorically, by Ari's job at the Charcoaler, which represents at least a degree of financial freedom. Meanwhile, thematically significant motifs that reappear in this section include sparrows (here again representing vulnerability), references to being Mexican (which are pointedly ambivalent here – self-mocking, ironic, and proud, all at the same time, clear reflections of the narrative's thematic interest in exploring /defining cultural identity), and references to Ari's brother. These references continue to keep that particular mystery alive, and simultaneously embody / manifest the book's thematic interest in the power of secrets: Ari's continued brooding over his brother is a clear example of the dangerous, obsessive side of that power.

The most important element of this section is its portrayal of how the coming-of-age experiences (that is, the growing into adulthood) of both Ari and Dante take on accelerated, very different explorations in this section. As they both experiment with sexuality, alcohol, and partying, there is a sense that they are pushing their own boundaries, discovering what they like and what they don't, and how they feel about what their parents tell them what they can/could/should be doing. They are getting to know themselves and their relationship with the ways, temptations, and traps of the outside world, all important elements of the coming-of-age experience, both in art and in life.



Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphoric / symbolic value of Legs? Elements to consider include her name, and Ari finding her where he does.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the author includes the scenes / conversations about the “getting to know you” questions? What point do you think is being made in relationship to the story? To the characters (particularly to Ari)? To the themes?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Aristotle and Dante's letter writing styles. How do they approach correspondence? Who withholds information and who is more upfront?

Vocabulary

entitled, melancholy, mock, constitute, amendment, reside, sincerity, inadequate, modernism, belligerent, disingenuous, inane, hydraulics, misanthrope, elective



Section 5 - Letters on a Page, Part 2

Summary

Letters on a Page, Chapters 19 – 27. Ari continues his driving lessons with his dad (commenting in narration on how they have a good time but don't talk about Ari's brother) and eventually gets his license. Ari is also tempted to do drugs but refuses: he does, however, give in to curiosity and decides to get drunk, using a street person outside the liquor store to get some beer. He takes it home, sits in his truck, drinks his beer, thinks about Dante, and then goes to bed, commenting in narration that he had no dreams that night. As Christmas approaches, Ari is wrapping some presents and, while searching for a pair of scissors, discovers a sealed envelope with his brother's name on it: "Bernardo." He resists the temptation to open it, but finds himself thinking even more about his brother. In the meanwhile, he also gets a letter from Dante, in which Dante reveals that he wants to kiss boys more than he wants to kiss girls. Ari comments in narration that he realized that if he still wanted to be Dante's friend, he would have to get used to that side of him. He and Dante also talk on the phone, their conversation revealing that Ari brought Dante an expensive art book about "The Raft of the Medusa" for Christmas, and that Dante is really moved by the gift. Ari realizes how much he misses Dante. Later, Ari is invited to a New Year's Eve party by Gina. There, he actually kisses Ileana, who tells him he's the best kisser she's ever known.

Chapters 28 through 31 – A letter from Dante, in which he asks if Ari masturbates and what he thinks about when he does, sends Ari into embarrassed anger with his friend. This anger carries on through the next four months (January through April) which Ari describes in narration as otherwise being pretty routine. There are exceptions: his discovery that Ileana has a boyfriend, and later that she got pregnant and married him upsets him significantly. So does the letter from Dante in which he reveals that the girl he's been practicing kissing with told him that when he kissed her, it seemed like he was kissing someone else. Dante also confesses that he wants to return to El Paso, that he's worried about the reaction when he tells his parents he's gay (see Quote 12), and that he's worried that he and Ari will no longer be friends. Ari's narration makes no reference to this letter. On the last day of school, Ari goes out into the desert with Gina, Susie, and some beer. Together they look up at the stars (which they describe as beautiful), wonder about whether they'll ever find out the secrets of the universe, and whether love has anything to do with those secrets.

Analysis

On a structural / stylistic level, it's important to note that the short chapters continue in the second half of "Letters on a Page." There is the sense here that both the narrative and the characters, Ari in particular, are marking time and/or skimming over the various events that take place during this time simply because there's not that much going on: it could be argued, in fact, that Ari, as person and as narrator, thinks that life is not really



worth paying much attention to while Dante is gone, which is why his narration of that life (particularly in this portion of Chapter 4) is so skimpy.

This is not to say that this chapter is without its significant events: the buildup and then breakdown of the “relationship” with Ileana (Ari’s first betrayal); the letter-driven confrontation with Dante’s comfort with his sexuality (which seems to trigger extreme discomfort in Ari about his own mysterious feelings); and Dante’s concerns about what will happen when he “comes out” (i.e. reveals his homosexuality) all lead to important steps along Ari’s coming-of-age journey of transformation; all reveal more about the characters (to themselves and to each other); and all heighten / intensify the reader’s interest in what’s going to happen next.

Ultimately, though, the two most significant elements of this section are Ari’s discovery of the Bernardo envelope and the visit to the desert. The first is significant for many reasons: in terms of story / plot / character development, it deepens Ari’s interest in the truth about his brother, and makes his quest to find out that truth more urgent. Here it’s interesting to consider the implications of the timing of that find—around Christmas. Perhaps the finding of the envelope is a strange sort of “gift,” perhaps even a mysterious “secret of the universe”? In any case, and on a thematic level, the finding of the envelope manifests two of the novel’s key themes – discovering family as an aspect of coming of age, and the power of secrets. Finally, the finding of the envelope foreshadows important moments at the climax of the narrative, in which the envelope’s contents are revealed. Another important piece of foreshadowing: the comment by Dante’s “girlfriend” about feeling like he’s kissing someone else, which foreshadows the moment later in the narrative when the identity of that “someone else” is explicitly revealed (although readers could probably guess, at this point in the story, who that “someone else” might just be).

The second most significant element in this section can be found in its concluding moments: specifically, the visit to the desert. There are several important values here: it deepens the friendship between Ari and Gina into something more than just boy/girl teasing; it introduces the “secrets of the universe” motif, which is the first time the actual title phrase is mentioned; and, in a related point, it foreshadows the novel’s final moments, in which Ari, on another visit to the desert and in the company of another character, has an epiphany (sudden discovery) about what another of those “secrets” might just be.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the significance of there being no comment in Ari’s narration on Dante’s letter expressing his worries about being gay?

Discussion Question 2

What is the connection, do you think, between the juxtaposition of Dante’s letter and Ari’s going out into the desert with Gina and Susie?



Discussion Question 3

Why is Dante worried that he and Ari will no longer be friends?

Vocabulary

ingrate, pathetic, compliment (n.), ecstatic



Section 6 - Remember the Rain

Summary

Chapters 1 through 4 – As Ari’s summer begins, he starts working full time at the Charcoaler. At one point he and his mom have a sometimes banter-y, sometimes very pointed conversation about the man he’s becoming, half-joking about him quitting his job, about him becoming a bad boy, and how her concerns for him / thoughts about who he should be seem, to Ari, to make her “un-Mexican.” She comments in response that she’s “an educated woman. That doesn’t un-Mexicanize” her. Shortly afterwards, Ari and Legs discover that Dante has returned. The two friends embrace, commenting on how each other has changed physically and assuring each other that they will always be friends. They then go to visit Dante’s parents, who welcome Ari warmly. Ari has a sense that something in Mrs. Quintana has changed, and realizes how happy he is to be, as Mrs. Quintana says, part of their family. He feels loved, he comments in narration, but adds that “love was always something heavy for me. Something I had to carry.” Later, he and Dante make a commitment to always be there for each other (particularly if Dante is ever harassed for being “queer”) and go out to the desert in Ari’s truck. As they’re looking at the stars, Dante reveals that his mom is going to have a baby, and that he’s frightened of telling them he’s gay. Ari assures the weeping Dante that his parents love him, and always will.

Chapters 5 through 10 - One night a few days later, Ari is visiting Dante in his bedroom when Dante talks him into an experiment: Ari, Dante says, has never actually tried kissing a boy, so he can’t know whether it works for him. Ari lets Dante kiss him and starts to respond, but then backs off, insisting that it didn’t “work for him.” Dante feels guilty and starts to cry. The boys don’t talk to each other for a few days, but reconnect when Ari asks Dante to volunteer with him at the local food bank, something that Ari’s mom has been after him to do. Before he goes, Ari is tempted to look into the envelope about his brother, but decides not to: nevertheless, his work is distracted, and after a conversation with his father in which he almost tells the truth about what’s worrying him, Ari and Dante get some beer, go out into the desert, and get drunk. There, Ari comments in narration, he started discovering some of the secrets of the universe (see Quote 15). Over the next few days, Ari’s mom goes to visit her sister Ophelia; Dante admits to believing that there’s a boy at work who wants to kiss him; Dante and Ari argue over whether Ari should have told Gina and Susie about the car accident, and about saving Dante’s life (Dante can’t understand why Ari wants to keep it such a secret); and they discuss what Mrs. Quintana is going to name the new baby. After that conversation, Ari and Dante drive out into the desert, smoke some marijuana, and when it starts to storm, they take off their clothes (leaving on their sneakers) and run around naked in the rain. Ari comments in narration that if Dante had tried to touch him, he wouldn’t have known what to do.

Chapters 11 through 18 – One morning, Ari is woken up early by his father, who tells him they have to make an emergency trip to Tuscon, Arizona: Ophelia has suddenly



fallen ill with a stroke. As Ari makes arrangements for Legs to be taken care of by Dante and his family, he reflects on how fond he was of his Aunt Ophelia; how she made him feel loved; and how he had a long say with her when he was younger. On the drive to Tuscon, conversation with Ari's dad turns to the reasons why Ari went to stay with Ophelia: it was the time, he said, that Bernardo was on trial and being sentenced, and Ari's mom had a breakdown. Ari stops his car to let his dad get out and cry, and then goes and comforts him. Ari's narration reveals that Ophelia's funeral was well attended, but by her friends and not her family: she was, according to his mom and dad, a lesbian, and the family couldn't handle it. In the aftermath of the funeral, Ari discovers that Ophelia left him her house in her will; that his mother wants to show him the correspondence that passed between Ophelia and her; and that his father told his mother about the conversation about Bernardo, and that she wants to show him some pictures of her. Ari comments in narration that he thinks his parents thought there were too many secrets in the world. On the way home, Ari reflects on how rain and storms felt like kisses, and how "the summer sun was not meant for boys like me. Boys like me belonged to the rain."

Analysis

There are a great many developments in this section, taking place on almost all the main levels of storytelling – plot (i.e. events), character (i.e. individual reactions and/or transformations as a result of those events), and theme (i.e. the meaning of those events and those transformations for the reader).

To begin with the last (i.e. themes), there are developments in all the major themes in this section. The coming of age process for both characters, but particularly for Ari, picks up both pace and depth in this section, as many events (the kiss between Ari and Dante, the revelations about Bernardo and about Aunt Ophelia, and Ari's likening of kisses to rain) have significant impact on Ari's moving from youth to maturity. They also propel him further into discoveries about himself, and then again function on a third thematic level, in that they all represent various aspects of the novel's thematic exploration of secrets. This is also true of the emotional reaction of Ari's father to telling the story about Bernardo (see Discussion Question 1). Meanwhile, the revelations about both Bernardo and Ophelia also manifest the novel's thematic exploration of discovery of family as part of the coming of age process, while the details about Ophelia's rejection also add a (darker) facet to the book's explorations of what it means to be Mexican (as does the bantering conversation between Ari and his mother in the first part of this section). All of these points also relate to the novel's exploration of character, in that all the characters are, to varying degrees, confronted, challenged, and changed by unexpected truths, surprising discoveries, and powerful intensities of feeling.

It must also be noted that all these events relate to plot and structure, in that they build pace / momentum to the events in the following / final section. This, in turn, means that they simultaneously foreshadow those events, in which all three of these main elements converge in the book's climax. There are other foreshadowings in this section as well, several of which also foreshadow either events leading to the climax or to the climax



itself. These include the reference to Ari being there to defend Dante if he's ever bullied for being queer; the reference to the potentially kissable boy at the place where Dante works (who plays an important role in events that trigger the climax); and the revelation of what crime, exactly, sent Bernardo to jail, a crime echoed in events that also trigger / contribute to the book's climactic scene.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the various ways in which the events of this section manifest the novel's thematic interest in the power of secrets – consider both positive and negative aspects (i.e. the releasing of truth as well as the keeping of secrets).

Discussion Question 2

Given the metaphoric connection throughout the novel between rain and emotional vulnerability, what would you say is the reason why Ari feels like rain and storms are like kisses?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ari sees being loved as a “burden” and/or a responsibility? Do you agree or disagree with this perspective / attitude? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

ecotone, purity, capacity, persuasive, demonstrative, decency, requirement, inconsolable



Section 7, All the Secrets of the Universe

Summary

Chapters 1 through 6 – The rain continues, off and on, for Ari and his family's entire trip back to El Paso. At one point, Ari's mother asks him whether the rain ever reminds him of the accident that broke his legs. Ari realizes that instead, it makes him think more about Dante. The next day, when Ari goes to pick up Legs from Dante's, he learns from Dante's father that Dante is in hospital after being beaten up by a gang of boys who caught him kissing another boy. Mr. Quintana tearfully asks Ari why Dante never told him about himself, and Ari says it's not always easy for sons to talk to their fathers. When Ari takes Legs home, he tells his parents that he's going to the hospital and why. There he sees Dante (who is unconscious and unrecognizable) and Mrs. Quintana, who first asks Ari to say whether he will always be Dante's friend and then tells him that she thinks Dante is in love with him, adding that she believes that the boy Dante was kissing was a stand-in for him. Ari realizes just how much Dante means to him, but his thoughts turn to Mrs. Quintana when she starts weeping and asking why Dante didn't run from the bullies. "Because," Ari says, "he's Dante." Ari then tracks down the boy at Dante's job that Dante said he liked (Daniel); confirms that it was he who kissed Dante; and bullies him into revealing the names of the attackers. Ari then tracks down one of the attackers (the son of a family friend) and, anger getting the better of him, beats him up. The fight is broken up by the attacker's father, who (narration reveals) calls Ari's parents, who in turn angrily confront Ari when he gets home. When his mother confesses that Bernardo beat someone up too, in a mixture of anger and tears Ari explains what happened and apologizes, insisting that he's not his brother and confessing that he's ashamed for wanting to hurt someone. Ari's father says he's "fighting this war in the worst possible way" and that he should have asked for help. Ari says he didn't know how.

Chapters 7 through 13 – In the aftermath of his fight with Dante's attacker, Ari's mother gets out the envelope labelled "Bernardo" and starts the first of a series of conversations that result in Ari finally knowing what happened with his brother, a story that he shares with Dante: Bernardo, Ari learns (and tells Dante) was always angry, and always released that anger physically. At one point, Bernardo picked up a prostitute, and when he learned that the prostitute was a transvestite (a man dressed as a woman), his anger exploded, and the prostitute was killed. Later, in a juvenile detention center, Bernardo's anger exploded again, and he killed another inmate. Ari's conversations about Bernardo with his parents lead to Bernardo's picture being put up around the house, while his (Ari's) conversations about him with Dante lead Ari to seriously question how to deal with his own anger. Later, Dante confesses that when he was kissing the boy from work, he imagined that he was kissing Ari. Ari tells him he needs to rethink his thoughts.

Chapters 14 through 21 – At the beginning of August, Ari wakes up and sees the scars on his legs, wondering about the different kinds of scars (physical and emotional) that



people have. After going swimming, he goes to visit Dante, but becomes angry when he discovers that Daniel is there. Later, when he talks with Dante, Ari erupts in resentment that Dante seems to have forgiven Daniel for running away while he (Dante) was being attacked. A few days later, Ari's mother confronts Ari about why he hasn't talked to Dante any of the times he's called. When Ari doesn't respond, his mother calls a "family meeting": her, Ari, and Ari's father. During the meeting, Ari's father tearfully tells the story of how, during his tour of duty in Vietnam, was forced to leave one of his buddies behind. At the same time as he's realizing the importance and value of his father finally opening up to him, Ari also realizes that his father is saying he's proud of Ari for standing up for Dante. Then, the conversation shifts, and Ari's parents gently push him towards acknowledging that he is in love with Dante. Ari breaks down crying, realizing that what they're saying is true. A short time later, after going bowling with their parents, Ari and Dante drive out into the desert. There, Ari tries to get a reluctant, angry Dante to kiss him: Dante, however, realizes what Ari is getting at, and insists that Ari do the kissing – which he does. They kiss for a long time, and then spend the night lying in the back of Ari's truck, looking at the stars. Ari realizes another of the secrets of the universe: that they were right in front of him, in Dante. He also realizes another one: that he, Ari, is fully and finally free.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section of the narrative is that it contains the novel's climax, its point of highest emotional, narrative, and thematic intensity. Some might think that the beating that Dante suffers might fulfill the requirements of a climax: it's intense, confrontational, and an important turning point for the protagonist – as a result of this incident, Ari comes face to face with an important aspect of himself (i.e. the violence and anger that have been simmering inside of him for much of the narrative, as foreshadowed way back in Section 1 when he faces down the bullies who killed the innocent bird). When considering / defining a story's climax, however, it's important to remember that there are other kinds of intensity, confrontation, and turning points besides those that are connected to physical experience. It's also important to remember that climaxes, particularly in coming-of-age stories such as this one, are ultimately defined by how they affect the central character's overall journey of transformation over the course of a story – specifically, his process of maturation (i.e. becoming an adult). With those two elements in mind, then, it's clear that the true climax of the book is Ari's conversation with his parents, a scene of undeniable intensity that confronts him with a series of important truths: about his brother, about his parents' choices around his brother's actions and around Ari himself, and ultimately about his parents' knowledge about Ari's true feelings for Dante. These truths, in turn, prove to be a more significant turning point for Ari in his process of maturation than the physical confrontation, because after all, the entire novel has been about the Ari/Dante relationship, and it is the confrontation with Ari's parents that ultimately have the most effect ON that central relationship and on Ari's coming-of age.

Meanwhile, it's important to note that the confrontation between Ari and his parents also contains the book's thematic climax. The primary coming-of-age theme reaches its point



of ultimate significance as Ari leaves behind some of the important questions of his childhood/early youth (i.e. about Bernardo, about his feelings for Dante) and moves into young adulthood armed with truths that have been kept secret from him, or in the case of the latter, he has kept secret from himself. These developments, in turn, form the climaxes of three of the novel's secondary themes: the discovery of self (as Ari discovers truths about himself); the discovery of family (as Ari discovers truths about his family); and the power of secrets (which transforms into a positive, affirming power as the negative power of retained secrets is released). Developments and/or the climax of the novel's fifth theme, perceptions about being Mexican, are less apparent, but are there nonetheless: because Dante's attacker is Mexican, and because Ari's parents are again able to transcend the attitudes of their culture towards same sex attraction (as they did with Aunt Ophelia), the novel comments, by implication rather than overt statement, on different aspects of being Mexican.

Other important points to note in this section include the way several events are the fulfilment of earlier foreshadowings. These include the attack on Dante (which was metaphorically foreshadowed by a violent encounter with bullies earlier in the narrative); Dante's confession about who he was thinking about while he was kissing Daniel (foreshadowed on a number of earlier occasions by people telling Ari, or at least implying to him, that they believe Dante was thinking about HIM while kissing other people); and Ari and Dante's visit to the desert. This last has been foreshadowed by each of the visits Ari, and Ari and Dante together, have made to the desert: the visit here is, arguably, a kind of mini-climax in the mini-story of Ari's relationship with the desert, and with the secrets of the universe (not to mention the freedom to be himself) that he finds there.

Discussion Question 1

When Mrs. Quintana asks Ari why Dante didn't run away, Ari says "Because he's Dante." What do you think that means? What is Ari saying with that answer?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the various section headings and their relationship not only to each individual section, but to the story. Discuss the relationship of each heading to story, theme, character, meaning, and imagery.

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the connection / relationship between Ari's father's story about leaving a buddy behind in the war and the incident with Dante, Daniel, and Ari? What do you think he is suggesting to Ari by telling that story?

Vocabulary

autoeroticism, euphemism, berserk, inexplicable, pensive, ballistic, transvestite, skirmish, reconnaissance, monsoon, convoy

Characters

Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza

Ari is the novel's central character, its protagonist and narrator. As the story begins, he is fifteen years old; a loner, as much by choice as by temperament; and he has a tendency towards a sort of defensive violence that he deploys when he's being bullied or patronized. He also has a mostly silent, complicated relationship with his war-veteran father, a loving, bantering relationship with his mother, and distant relationships with his siblings: a pair of twin sisters who are twelve years older, and a brother in prison for a crime about which Ari knows nothing.

There is the sense, at the beginning of the narrative, that another part of the reason Ari is a loner and has, as he says, no friends, is a slow-simmering anger – at his parents, for keeping him uninformed about his brother and also for trying to control his life; at his Mexican heritage, which he seems to think defines and/or limits him in a similar way; and at the world, which he seems to see as an unwelcoming place. Through meeting Dante, the novel's catalytic / transformative antagonist, Ari comes to know, understand, and accept more about himself; he develops a wider experience of different sorts of feelings (including love, which he struggles through most of the story to deny); he comes face to face with the true dangers of his anger; and he also arrives at a deeper, more compassionate understanding of other people and their failings.

Ari's journey of transformation over the course of the story embodies two of the book's more essential elements. The first is its title: Ari learns a great deal about “the secrets of the universe” (i.e. love, compassion, integrity) as they manifest both in himself and in the people around him (so does Dante, but there is the strong and clear sense that Ari both learns more and learns more deeply). The second aspect of the story embodied by Ari and his journey of transformation is its primary theme: specifically, its exploration of coming of age, or a young person's process of greater emotional and/or psychological maturity. See also “Themes.”

Dante Quintana

Dante is the second of the novel's two principal characters, its antagonist. While many (most?) antagonists perform their function (i.e. triggering change and/or transformation in the protagonist) by actively blocking, challenging, or confronting the protagonist, Dante is the sort of antagonist who might be described as “passive”: he triggers change in Ari, as other passive antagonists do, simply by being who he is and doing what he does. What's interesting about this particular protagonist / antagonist relationship, as opposed to the more confrontational sort of protagonist / antagonist relationship, is that there is a great deal about Dante that Ari admires and wants to emulate: a sense of freedom, and a sense of openness and comfort with his parents, with his feelings, and with his place in the world. These positive aspects to Dante's character are as effective



in triggering Ari's transformation as are elements of his (Dante's) identity that Ari finds more negative / challenging. These elements include a sometimes confrontational honesty that occasionally borders on tactlessness; a sometimes too-present depth of feeling, particularly sadness and/or grief; and an easy comfort with sexuality – more particularly, his emerging homosexuality.

This is perhaps the part of Dante's identity and character that is most challenging for Ari, and triggers the most change in him. Here it's interesting to note that Dante never really seems uncomfortable about his sexual orientation. Yes, he's worried about how people will react to it, but he never seems to have a problem with actually being *of* that particular orientation. This sense of comfort might be considered somewhat surprising, given his age (late teens), his ethnic heritage (i.e. Mexican culture, often traditionally conservative / Roman Catholic); and the period in which the story is set (see "Setting – 1987").

What Dante and Ari have most in common, however, is a deep sensitivity and vulnerability. As an aspect of their respective identities and experiences, it rarely comes up directly in conversation, if ever. It is, however, a profound and important element of their relationship that, over the course of the story, they *sense* that vulnerability; reach for it and protect it; and, by the novel's conclusion, embrace it in both themselves, and in each other.

Ari's Father

Mr. Mendoza is a veteran of the Vietnam War, troubled by what contemporary psychology would probably call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He is generally silent, and clearly troubled (and by more than his war experiences), but just as clearly loving towards his son and wife. Mr. Mendoza's choice to open up about his history and personal truth at the narrative's climax is one of the more significant triggers for Ari's taking the final steps in his journey towards coming-of-age, and more specifically, towards acknowledging the truth about his feelings for Dante.

Ari's Mother

Mrs. Mendoza is a school teacher. She is portrayed as wise, compassionate, insightful, intelligent, and educated. She also has a bit of a temper: never emotionally violent or intense, she nevertheless makes her displeasure, which can show up quite suddenly, clear to both her husband and her son. This temper, and tendency towards being controlling (Ari sometimes refers to her as a "fascist," a joking comment with a tiny bit of a barb in it), are softened by a deep sense of love and compassion for Ari, for her troubled husband, for her aunt (see "Aunt Ophelia" below) and, eventually, for her imprisoned older son.



Bernardo

Bernardo is Ari's older brother. He never actually appears in the story, but is nevertheless a powerful presence since he was imprisoned since Ari was a child for a crime Ari knows nothing about. Bernardo's absence and the secrets associated with that absence haunt Ari and in many ways fuel his simmering anger. Late in the narrative, after Ari experiences an outburst of violence, he discovers that Bernardo was imprisoned because of similar outbursts, leading him (Ari) to both insist to his parents and decide for himself that he is not his older brother, and will not go down the same destructive path.

Aunt Ophelia

This character is Ari's aunt, the sister of his mother. She never actually appears in the narrative, but her death is the catalyst for important moments in Ari's life. Most particularly, his discovery that she was a lesbian, and that his mother and father were virtually the only family members who did not reject her, helps him become comfortable, to a degree, with his own emerging homosexuality.

Dante's Father

Mr. Quintana is a university professor. Warm and intelligent, playful and emotional, he is nevertheless clear and firm about how far he can be pushed by his outspoken, playful, often rule-blind son. Mr. Quintana is also the more emotional of Dante's parents, and there is the clear implication that Dante's capacity for both deep feeling and for expressing that feeling comes from his dad.

Dante's Mother

Mrs. Quintana is the least developed / least present of the four parents in the narrative. A psychologist and therapist, she has a great deal of insight into both Dante and Ari, aware of their potentially troubling sexual orientation even before they are. Her emotions, while expressed with restraint, run deeply, perhaps even more so than those of her more overtly emotional husband: Mrs. Quintana's reactions to Dante's two near-death experiences (the car accident in which Ari's legs are broken and the beating from the homophobic boys) reveal just how deeply she loves her son and, eventually, the boy (Ari) who saved Dante from being hit by the car, avenged the beating, and eventually discovers the depth of his own love for Dante.



Gina Navarro

Gina is a school friend of Ari's. Outspoken and bossy, she tends to be merciless in her teasing of him, but simultaneously has a capacity for compassion and respect that softens her more confrontational sharp edges.

Ileana

The beautiful, several-years-older Ileana is Ari's first crush. He follows her around their school, makes efforts to connect with her, and eventually has his first kiss with her. His disappointment when he finds out that she has become pregnant and married the father of her baby sends him into questioning of relationships in general, and relationships with girls in particular.

Daniel

Daniel works with Dante at the drugstore where the latter gets a summer job. They share an attraction, to the point where they kiss each other. That kiss, however, is interrupted by a homophobic attack which Dante faces down but from which Daniel runs. Daniel is forgiven by Dante, but lingeringly resented by Ari.

Julian

Julian is one of the boys who attacked Dante and Daniel when they were found kissing. Ari tracks Julian down and attacks him in return / in revenge. Julian's father and Ari's father are old friends, and their sorting out of who is responsible for what action and what costs of medical treatment result in Ari being virtually absolved of guilt and/or responsibility.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sparrows

Throughout the narrative, birds in general (and sparrows in particular) appear as symbols of vulnerability. Wounded and/or damaged birds are external representations of the wounded-ness and/or damaged-ness of various characters, but most particularly Ari and Dante.

Rain

Rain appears throughout the narrative, most often in connection to Ari's emotions. Two of its most vividly portrayed appearances are in relation to two seemingly different events. The incident in which Ari pushes Dante out of the way of an oncoming car but which breaks his (Ari's) legs is triggered, in part, by rain-slicked streets, appears destructive; the sequence near the end of the novel, in which a storm leads Ari to thoughts of kisses and imagining kissing Dante, appears softer and more nurturing. Further reflection, however, reveals that both these incidents (and several others throughout the narrative) are ultimately associated with the same thing: Ari's love for, and devotion to, Dante.

Dreams

On several occasions and for several reasons, Ari experiences vivid, frightening dreams. They vary in intensity: Ari sometimes wakes from his dreams screaming in fear, sometimes he wakes sobbing. Sometimes they're happier dreams, most often they're mysterious and thought provoking. As he himself suggests in narration, they are almost all associated with strong feelings and/or truths that he doesn't have any other way to face or connect to. Here it's important to note that other characters (Dante, Ari's Father) also have dreams: for those characters also, dreams represent the release of feelings and ideas that eventually lead to healthy, transformative realizations and/or releases.

Dante's Sketchpad

Dante, who aspires to be an artist, frequently makes sketches of visually and/or emotionally interesting things. He often sketches Ari, his work and the sketchpad both representing Dante's feelings and attitudes (particularly his growing love and desire for Ari). Ari's fear of what he might see in Dante's perceptive, revealing artwork keep him from looking it - in other words, from facing truths he doesn't want to see.



Shoes

For the freedom-loving Dante, shoes represent a kind of confinement or restriction. He prefers the comfort of going around barefoot, in spite of his mother's belief that doing so makes him (and, by extension, his family) look like "poor Mexicans." The shoe-throwing game that Dante and Ari play simultaneously represents and foreshadows their growing sense of personal freedom, playfulness, and ultimately joy.

Ari's Truck

For his sixteenth birthday, when he becomes legally able to drive, Ari's dad buys him a truck, "a 1957 Chevy pickup. Cherry red with chrome fenders, chrome hubcaps, and whitewall tires. It was the most beautiful truck in the world. And it was mine." In the same way as going without shoes represents freedom for Dante, the truck represents freedom, as well as maturity, for Ari. The truck enables Ari, and eventually Dante, to experience even more metaphorically significant freedom as it enables them to frequently drive out into the desert (see "Settings").

Beauty

In his narration, Ari frequently refers to things being "beautiful." Key examples are his experience of the universe in Chapter 10 (see Quote 4), his experience of Dante's face at the end of Section 1, and his father's description of Legs in Part 4, Chapter 16. These references imply, without actually suggesting, that Ari is on a search for something beautiful in his life.

Legs

Legs is the female mutt that Ari meets while walking by Dante's house after the latter has moved temporarily to Chicago. At first, the dog becomes something of a replacement for Dante, someone/thing for whom Ari can safely and comfortably express love. Later, Legs' influence / metaphoric value as a representation of love expands, as he triggers love and affection in Dante and the other members of his family as well.

The Paintings at the Art Institute

During his time in Chicago, Dante (as he reveals in his letters) frequently visits the Art Institute of Chicago, a world-class art gallery. There he becomes emotionally attached to two paintings which represent key aspects of his life: "Nighthawks" evokes, in him, Ari's loneliness and makes Dante miss him even more; "Raft of the Medusa" represents/triggers Dante's belief that a painting can tell a story and reveal deeper truths about human existence.



The Bernardo Envelope

At one point in the novel, Ari discovers a sealed manila envelope labeled "Bernardo," the name of Ari's imprisoned older brother. The envelope represents the mysterious, secret presence of Bernardo in Ari's life and that of his family, a presence that Ari becomes increasingly desperate to understand. The opening of the envelope and the revealing of the pictures / stories inside represents the releasing of all the anger, fear, and grief about Bernardo in Ari and his parents, and the opening of possibility for freedom from the guilt and pain that Bernardo represents for all of them.



Settings

El Paso, Texas

This is the book's primary setting. Close to the Mexican border, it has a large Hispanic population, the ethnic community to which both Aristotle and Dante belong. Exploring the nature and aspects of Mexican identity is one of the book's secondary themes.

1987

The novel is set in 1987: pre-internet, pre-cell phones, and most importantly for the narrative, pre-gay marriage. This last is particularly significant, as one of the novel's most important narrative elements involves questions of how Dante and Ari believe the revelation of their same-sex orientation could / would be received. Without going into a great deal of detail, the late 1980's was a significant period for gay people in America: the gay rights movement was underway, but was just beginning to be undermined by the emergence of AIDS. This means that Dante and Ari are coming out (i.e. admitting their homosexuality) at a time of conflicting freedom and fear.

The Swimming Pool

Early in the narrative (and early in the first of the two transformative summers it portrays), Ari goes to the community swimming pool. There he meets Dante, an encounter that changes the courses of both their lives. The swimming pool becomes the setting for several other meetings and encounters between the two new friends.

The Desert

At several points throughout the narrative, Ari (and eventually Dante) experience waves of freedom, joy, and connection to "the secrets of the universe" being in the desert outside of El Paso. Ari's truck is the vessel through which they reach this place of freedom, a place where Ari and Dante in particular but also other characters can reveal and/or experience truths about themselves that the city doesn't, can't, or won't let them experience fully. It is a place of nature, where characters can be comfortable with their own personal natures.

Tuscon, Arizona

Late in the narrative, and as the result of family difficulties, Ari and his parents visit Tuscon, Arizona, the home of Ari's beloved Aunt Ophelia. The visit to Tuscon is the occasion / catalyst for the revelation of some important, life-changing, family truths and secrets.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

This is the novel's central theme, the aspect of what the story is “about” that entwines most thoroughly and consistently with its line of action (i.e. plot) and the development of its major character (i.e. the protagonist's journey of transformation).

The phrase “coming of age” is commonly used in a wide range of literary and/or creative forms. It refers to a process of maturation, of a character (or characters) moving out of childhood / youth and into young adulthood. It is a process of losing innocence and gaining wisdom and insight; of learning about both the darker and lighter sides of being alive, and of being an individual; and of discovering more about the nature of life as a whole.

The concept of “Coming of Age” can have a wide range of manifestations, many of which appear in “Aristotle and Dante ...” and which form its secondary themes. They are developed primarily through the experiences of the two central characters, most significantly protagonist Ari and but also antagonist Dante. They both begin to emerge from childhood and into adulthood as the result of several different types of experiences: their encounters with each other (from the innocence of their first meeting at the swimming pool to the knowing sexuality of the final romantic meeting under the stars); their encounters with danger, both inadvertent (the car accident) and deliberate (the attack on Dante), associated with simply functioning in the world; and their encounters with their parents. Many stories of this nature involve discoveries that a character's parents are more than just mother and/or father (or, for that matter, any other family member): they are people. In the case of this particular story, both sets of parents (the Quintanas and the Mendozas) reveal their secrets, truths, and experiences in a way that Ari in particular finds profoundly transformative.

All that said, perhaps the most transformative encounters experienced by both Ari and Dante are their encounters with themselves, “Coming of Age” by discovering personal truths relating to, among other things, values, beliefs, and feelings. These discoveries are particularly significant for Ari since it his coming of age, his process of maturation, around which the story's plot principally revolves – most specifically, his discovery of his true emotional nature (his capacities for both anger and love) and true sexual nature. Dante grows and comes of age to a significant degree: Ari grows more, and further, and with more obvious results. In short, it is Ari's experience that embodies this primary theme, and many of its sub-themes. For further consideration of these sub-themes, see “Discovering Self” and “Discovering Family” below.



Discovering Self

A key component of many coming of age stories is the discovery of the self – of values and beliefs; of emotional capacities and tendencies; of hopes and goals and intentions; of physicality and sexuality. Such stories generally portray their young characters as initially having a limited sense of who they are; as, over the course of the narrative, having that sense expanded (often either against their will or as the result of circumstances, or both); as experiencing discomfort as a result of that expansion; and as often experiencing a new sense of hope and possibility once that discomfort fades and new truths are revealed. The experiences of the central characters of “Aristotle and Dante ...” tend to follow this pattern / template quite closely.

(A variation on the template sees some protagonists in “coming of age” stories emerging from their experiences with more despair than hope, with more fear than courage – an equally valid personal, thematic, and narrative response to being confronted with often unsuspected aspects of life. While “Aristotle and Dante ...” does not “go there,” as it were, there are certainly plenty of works that do).

Protagonist Ari undergoes what is arguably a deeper and more uneasy discovery of the self than antagonist Dante. He starts his journey in what seems to be a darker place: more fearful, more angry, and more isolated; more uncertain about his values, his emotions, and his goals; more uneasy with his family; and more uncomfortable with his physicality and sexuality. All of these discomforts become even more intense as the events of the narrative progress, and Ari finds himself confronted with even darker aspects of who he is: his anger, his confusion, and the sexual desire / affection for his best friend that, as he himself suggests in self-aware narration, he has suppressed ever since he and Dante met. But by the same token, Ari’s discovery and acceptance of his newly emergent self are more joyful than Dante’s: his celebration of his new self as the novel concludes makes the clear thematic suggestion that the part of coming of age that includes the discovery of self can be one of happiness, release, and freedom.

Discovering Family

As mentioned above, an important aspect of the coming of age process is the discovery that one’s parents and/or other family members are not just parental figures, but are people in their own right: they have fears, needs, desires, problems, and secrets. This discovery of familial humanity, the learning that those who had played a very specific role in a young character’s life are much more than that role, tends to play a profound role in the discoveries about themselves and the world that trigger and/or define a coming of age, a growth from childhood into maturity.

In “Aristotle and Dante ...”, both the title characters, protagonist and antagonist, make discoveries about their parents, are changed by those discoveries, and become more adult as a result. In Dante’s case, he learns that his parents – with whom he already has a good relationship – have more compassion and wisdom than he thought they did: their acceptance of his sexual orientation, when he feared their rejection, propels him



powerfully along the path towards the freedom and joy at which he arrives, in Ari's arms, at the novel's conclusion.

For Ari, again his transformation is more significant, as much as a result of his parents' transformations as his own. The family's history and relationships hold both greater pains and greater secrets, with greater emotional and familial implications, than those of Dante's family (at least those which the novel reveals). An additional element here is the darkly looming, mysterious presence of Ari's imprisoned brother. Ari's determination to find out the truth of what Bernardo did and why the parents of them both kept that truth from him drive both plot and character development. That said, there is likewise a greater rebounding of darkness into light and freedom when Ari's parents make the choice to reveal their secrets, leading Ari to, in turn, admit to and face his own. The transformative (even healing) power of that honesty is, perhaps, the most vivid demonstration in the novel of the positive, transforming value of discovering family as part of the coming of age experience.

Discovering Cultural Identity (Being Mexican)

Ari and Dante both, in many ways and on several occasions, reveal themselves to be preoccupied, at least to some degree, with what it means to be Mexican. This preoccupation often colors their relationship with each other and with their respective parents, and does so in both good and bad ways.

On the one hand, there are celebrations of being Mexican - of that culture's food, sense of family, and sense of loyalty to fellow Mexicans. Examples include Ari's customization of his truck with lots of chrome, which is playfully and teasingly celebrated by Dante (and, to a degree, by Ari himself) as being typically Mexican. On the other hand, there are frequent references, made by the central characters and their parents, to negative perceptions of being Mexican – for example, how Dante's habit of going without shoes runs the risk, according to his mother, of the family being stereotypically perceived as "poor Mexican" and treated as such. In the same vein, there is also a reference to Ari's mother being angry that throughout her entire college career, she never had a Mexican professor – the comment is made in response to her awareness that Dante's father is exactly that, a Mexican professor. Perhaps most tellingly, there are suggestions that Ari's lesbian Aunt Ophelia was rejected by her family primarily because of traditional, conservative Mexican attitudes. In short, being Mexican is portrayed throughout the narrative as an ambivalent experience, one with both good and bad sides.

Here it's important to note that in this book by a Mexican author, there are no direct references to racial prejudice from white people towards Mexicans (it must be clearly recalled that the beating received by Dante is entirely the result of a public demonstration of same sex attraction). Attitudes towards being Mexican, both positive and negative, are expressed entirely by its Mexican characters – by those who live within the culture. Something else to be clearly recalled: Dante's beating comes at the prejudiced hands of another Mexican, not a "gringo" (a term that Ari uses at one point to describe his compassionate, skilled, perceptive white doctor).



All in all, and in terms of overall conflict and tension in the narrative, being Mexican is low on the list of the novel's narrative and thematic priorities. It is, however, an undercurrent that seems to be always present, forming an often implied but occasionally overtly demonstrated aspect of Ari and Dante's coming of age: the struggle to find out what being Mexican means for them.

Ultimately, there is the sense that an additional layer of meaning to the novel's development of this theme. It seems to be suggesting (particularly to its target audience of young readers) that cultural / ethnic identity is something to be both celebrated and challenged, particularly in relation to negative values held by both those inside and outside the boundaries of that identity.

The Power of Secrets

Several secrets are kept by several characters in "Aristotle and Dante ...", with what the novel suggests are pervasively negative results. The secret Ari's parents keep about his imprisoned brother; the secrets Ari's father keeps about his experiences while serving in the Vietnam War; and the secret Ari himself keeps about the true nature of his feelings for Dante (admittedly one which he doesn't consciously know he's keeping) – all are portrayed as having negative, corrosive, potentially all-destructive effects on both the person(s) keeping the secret and the person(s) from whom the secret is kept. This is an example of the novel's thematic interest in the negative power of secrets.

On the other side of the coin, however, and as mentioned above, is the novel's portrayal of the joy, healing, and connection that is possible when secrets are revealed. For much of the narrative, Ari's resentment of / unhappiness with his parents deepens the longer he goes without knowing the truths that he knows they are keeping from him, both about Bernardo and about his father's war experiences. Late in the story, however, in what might best be described as its emotional climax, the secrets about both Bernardo and Ari's father are revealed; tensions between Ari and his parents are broken down; and a new sense of freedom and connection begins to emerge. This is the novel's second-most significant example of the positive power of released secrets.

The primary example of this positive power occurs in the moments directly afterwards, in which Ari's parents confront him about a secret he didn't realize he was keeping: the true nature of his feelings for Dante. Here it's interesting and important to note that that confrontation is profoundly gentle and loving, and is not expressed in terms of sexual orientation (i.e. they never call him or his feelings gay or homosexual, let alone describe them as in any way bad or hurtful or dangerous). Their knowledge and acceptance, their confrontation of this secret is, rather, expressed in terms of love - Ari's for Dante, Dante's for him, and the love of both sets of parents for both young men. It is the final, most catalytic, and most transformative release of a secret in the novel, and propels Ari more powerfully than any other secret towards his true coming of age and the freedom that the novel says comes along with it.



Styles

Point of View

The story is narrated from the first person, past tense point of view – specifically, that of teenaged narrator Ari. This point of view draws the reader closely and tightly into Ari's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, offering an opportunity to engage with the protagonist more intimately than third person narration might, something that is usually the case with other first person narratives. All that said, an important point to note about first person narration in general, and the narration of this book in particular, is that the experiences, attitudes, and perspectives of other characters are presented through Ari's interpretation – the reader comes to know the other characters as a result of what Ari chooses to reveal about them, not in a fully objective way. The point is not made to suggest that his comments about the other characters are not valid, but rather to make clear that his first person narration, again like first person narration in general, defines every other character and situation in the story in terms of how they relate to / affect him.

In terms of the book's thematic point of view, there is one key point to note aside from those developed / explored in "Themes." This is the narrative's clear, arguably overly optimistic perspective on the emerging sexual orientation of the two central characters. Yes, Dante is violently attacked because he is gay; yes, both he and Ari worry about how their respective sets of parents might/will react when the nature of their sons' attractions become known. Those examples of negative attitudes towards same-sex attraction, or potential negative attitudes, are by far the minority: Ari's relatively easy acceptance of his attraction, the universally positive reactions of all four parents, and the reactions of more peripheral characters to news of those attractions suggest that the author's point of view / purpose in telling this particular story is that being young and gay is, if not always easy, ultimately a positive thing. The happy ending clearly makes this thematic claim. It's important to note, however, that a variety of circumstances within which the story unfolds suggest this claim is more than somewhat optimistic. See "Setting – 1987" and "Characters – Dante", along with "Section 6 – Discussion Question 3."

Language and Meaning

There are several significant aspects of language usage in the book. The first involves its vocabulary and style, both of which seem appropriately casual for the character and nature of its narrator, Mexican teenager Ari. Most of the time, the words the author uses sounds like those that such a person would use in telling a story: when there are more academic, more intellectual words (generally used by characters other than Ari), he makes a point of having to go look them up. Meanwhile, an important aspect of this use of vocabulary is a sprinkling of profanity, which some might say is under-employed,



particularly since Ari tends to have something of a streetwise edge to him, but which gives a fuller sense of the relative truth of the character portrait.

A related, and similarly important, point about language usage in the piece has to do with the relatively frequent but not oppressive references to being Mexican, in terms of everything from food to cultural values to perspectives of non-Mexicans. The book's thematic exploration of what it means to be Mexican is primarily explored through this particular aspect of language usage.

A third key point about language has to do with the repeated use of a particular word / image – the “motif” of beauty, or more specifically, of Ari finding things beautiful. The concept is used repeatedly, and in relationship to a variety of his experiences (see “Symbols and Symbolisms”), everything from Dante's face to the stars in the night sky to an experience of being free to a sweet kiss. Here it's important to note that the narrative never actually comes out and says that Ari is searching for beauty in his life: the narration of the piece is essentially Ari telling his own story, and the self-knowledge of this particular teenage boy doesn't appear to extend that quite far (although it might be different if it was Dante telling his own story). The frequent usage of that motif, however, and the wide variety of circumstances in which it's used, make the clear suggestion to the reader that such a search, for Ari, is a very real, if subconscious, aspect of his story and his identity.

Structure

The story is told in six sections, each of which focuses on a certain period of time within the development of the friendship between Ari and Dante. The first three parts focus on the summer in which they met; the fourth part focus on the eight month period that Dante is with his parents in Chicago; and the fifth and sixth parts focus on the second summer of Ari and Dante's friendship, a period in which they each face uncomfortable, but ultimately affirming, truths about themselves and their relationship.

Each section is broken down into several chapters, and this is one of the book's most significant structural elements. For the most part, the chapters are quite short, ranging from, at times, a single paragraph to, at other times, a few pages. The chief value associated with the brevity of these chapters is a sense of very tight focus on the chapter's event: an idea, a thought, an insight, a conversation ... whatever the key point that Ari wants to make and/or remember, the writing focuses tightly thereon.

In terms of narrative structure, it's movement from beginning through middle to end, the intensification of its action towards a climax, it's worth noting that the movement of the story is essentially linear and straightforward, moving from cause to effect, from action to reaction to action, from Point A to Point B to Point C all the way to the end. The novel's climax, its highest point of narrative intensity, is grounded in information and emotion rather than in action: specifically, the moment in Section 6 at which Ari is brought face to face with truths about his brother, his parents' actions in relation to both

him and his brother, and ultimately, truths about his sexual orientation. It is a moment of quiet, loving, compassion that is intense and transformative for protagonist Ari.



Quotes

One summer night I fell asleep, hoping the world would be different when I woke. In the morning, when I opened my eyes, the world was the same.

-- Narration (Aristotle) (Section 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: This is the first line of the novel. It functions to immediately indicate Aristotle's (Ari's) essential situation, one that fuels his actions and choices throughout the narrative: he doesn't want the world, his world, to be as it is - or at least how it seems to be. Over the course of the narrative, his world does indeed change, but not in the way he likely expects / imagines / hopes it will.

I had a rule that it was better to be bored by yourself than to be bored with someone else. I pretty much lived by that rule. Maybe that's why I didn't have any friends.

-- Narration (Aristotle) (Section 1, Chapter 4)

Importance: This quote, which occurs moments after a stranger at the swimming pool (who turns out to be Dante) offers to help Ari learn to swim, defines Ari's attitude towards friendship and/or companionship at the start of the story. The change in this attitude, as the result of events in the narrative, is one of the ways in which Ari comes of age / matures, and also gets to know more about himself.

I could have asked my father a lot of questions. I could have. But there was something in his face and eyes and in his crooked smile that prevented me from asking. I guess I didn't believe he wanted me to know who I was. So I just collected clues. Watching my father read that book was another clue in my collection. Someday all the clues would come together. And I would solve the mystery of my father.

-- Narration (Aristotle) (Section 1, Chapter 8)

Importance: This quote sums up Ari's relationship with his father, lays the groundwork for one of the narrative's more important subplots (i.e. the transformation of that relationship), and also marks an early phase of the book's thematic exploration of the power of secrets.

Something happened inside me as I looked out into the vast universe. Through that telescope, the world was closer and larger than I'd ever imagined. And it was all so beautiful and overwhelming and - I don't know - it made me aware that there was something inside of me that mattered.

-- Narration (Aristotle) (Section 1, Chapter 10)

Importance: This quote, which describes Ari's experiences while looking through Dante's telescope, symbolically represents the beginnings of self-valuing and self-compassion that Ari experiences as a result of his friendship with Dante. It also foreshadows important moments later in the narrative (particularly at its climax) at which Ari's self-knowledge / discovery deepens.



I was harder than Dante. I think I'd tried to hide that hardness from him because I'd wanted him to like me. But now he knew. That I was hard. And maybe that was okay. Maybe he could like the fact that I was hard just as I liked the fact that he wasn't hard.
-- Narration (Aristotle) (Section 1, Chapter 12)

Importance: This quote sums up important qualities about Aristotle and Dante's relationship that play significant roles as the narrative, and their story unfolds (particularly in relation to events near / at the climax).

There were so many ghosts in our house - the ghost of my brother, the ghosts of my father's war, the ghosts of my sister's voices. And I thought that maybe there were ghosts inside of me that I hadn't even met yet. They were there. Lying in wait.
-- Narration (Ari) (Section 2, Chapter 10)

Importance: In this quote, Ari poetically sums up the sense of emptiness, loneliness, and haunted-ness that fills his life. It is also a clear, vivid, and metaphoric representation of the novel's theme relating to the power of secrets.

My mother and father held hands. I wondered what that was like, to hold someone's hand. I bet you could sometimes find all of the mysteries of the universe in someone's hand.
-- Narration (Ari) (Section 3, Chapter 6)

Importance: This quote hints at three things - Ari's own longing for such intimacy in his own life; one of "the secrets of the universe" that, over the course of the narrative, Ari comes to understand a little more; and his eventual discovery of that particular "secret" in his own life.

Since the accident, I'd been mad at everyone, hated everyone, hated Dante, hated Mom and Dad, hated myself. Everyone. But right then, I knew I didn't really hate everyone. Not really. I didn't hate Dante at all. I didn't know how to be his friend. I didn't know how to be anybody's friend. But that didn't mean I hated him.
-- Narration (Ari) (Section 3, Chapter 10)

Importance: In the same way as Ari's fever breaks and he begins to get well, this quote portrays the moment when Ari's post-accident anger "breaks" and he becomes reconnected to the warmer, kinder, more open part of himself. This moment foreshadows events at the novel's climax in which the same kind of breakthrough takes place, but with much greater significance.

She looked into my eyes. I wanted to look away. But I didn't. Her eyes were like the night sky in the desert. It felt like there was a whole world living inside her. I didn't know anything about that world.
-- Narration (Ari) (Section 4, Chapter 5)

Importance: This quote describes the impact of Ari's first meeting with Ileana, the girl who becomes something of a love interest for him.



I sometimes think that I don't let myself know what I'm really thinking about. That doesn't make much sense but it makes sense to me. I have this idea that the reason we have dreams is that we're thinking about things that we don't know we're thinking about - and those things, well, they sneak out of us in our dreams. Maybe we're like tires with too much air in them. The air has to leak out. That's what dreams are.

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 4, Chapter 9)

Importance: In this quote, Ari has an insight into the nature and value of dreams that metaphorically clues the reader in to some of the possible reasons why he dreams what he does. It also suggests that Ari is starting to become aware of both the secrets and truths in himself that he's been struggling with throughout the story.

When I hung up the phone, I felt a little sad. And a little happy. For a few minutes I wished that Dante and I lived in the universe of boys instead of the universe of almost men.

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 4, Chapter 25)

Importance: This quote takes place after Dante and Ari speak on the phone just after Christmas, and Ari realizes just how much he misses his friend. The quote concisely sums up the complicated, multi-faceted nature of their relationship.

...I love my dad. My mom too. And i keep wondering what they're going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. I wonder how that's going to go over? I'm the only son. What's going to happen with the grandchildren thing?

-- Dante (Section 4, Chapter 30)

Importance: In this excerpt from one of his letters to Ari, Dante confesses his deepening concerns about being gay. It also vividly portrays Dante's at times unsettling frankness and directness.

Sometimes parents loved their sons so much that they made a romance out of their lives. They thought our youth could help us overcome everything. Maybe moms and dads forgot about this one small fact: being on the verge of seventeen could be harsh and painful and confusing. Being on the edge of seventeen could really suck."

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 5, Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote sums up the sense of simmering rebellion that defines Ari's character / struggle in the first chapter of this new section.

I liked watching them, all three of them around my truck. I wanted time to stop because everything seemed so simple, Dante and Legs falling in love with each other, Dante's mom and dad remembering something about their youth as they examined my truck, and me, the proud owner ... it was as if my eyes were a camera and I was photographing the moment, knowing that I would keep that photograph forever."

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 5, Chapter 3)

Importance: This section portrays the happiness that Ari feels at celebrating his



connection to / relationship with Dante's family - perhaps most particularly, the freedom and open feeling that seems to be missing in his own family.

One of the secrets of the universe was that our instincts were sometimes stronger than our minds ... another secret of the universe: sometimes pain was like a storm that came out of nowhere. The clearest summer morning could end in a downpour. Could end in lightning and thunder.

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 5, Chapter 7)

Importance: This marks the first point in the novel at which Ari discusses the "secrets of the universe" that are referred to in the book's title.

I closed my eyes. I held my hand out and felt the first drop. It was like a kiss. The sky was kissing me. It was a nice thought. It was something Dante would have thought ... I thought about the dreams I'd been having - all of them about kissing. But I never knew who I was kissing, I couldn't see. And then, just like that, we were in the middle of a downpour.

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 5, Chapter 18)

Importance: Ari's narration / reflections in this quote draw a clear metaphoric parallel between Ari's experiences of rain and his closeness with Dante.

I wanted to tell them that I never knew that people like Dante existed in the world, people who looked at the stars, and knew the mysteries of water, and knew enough to know that birds belonged to the heavens and weren't meant to be shot down from their graceful flights by mean and stupid boys. I wanted to tell them that he had changed my life and that I would never be the same, not ever. And that somehow it felt like it was Dante who had saved my life and not the other way around."

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 6, Chapter 4)

Importance: Here, in the aftermath of Dante's beating, Ari realizes just how much his relationship with Dante means to him. His reluctance / inability to speak of his feelings to his parents here ironically foreshadows moments later in the narrative when he finally is able to speak of those feelings, and is ultimately completely changed as a result.

Scars. A sign that you had been hurt. A sign that you had healed. Had I been hurt? Had I healed? Maybe we just lived between hurting and healing. Like my father. I think that's where he lived. In that in-between space ... my mother too, maybe. She'd locked my brother somewhere deep inside of her. And now she was trying to let him out. I kept running my finger up and down my scars.

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 6, Chapter 14)

Importance: Here Ari reflects on the physical scars left behind by his accident, and the emotional scars left behind (on him and on others) by situations and circumstances in his life.



All this time I had been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe, the secrets of my own body, of my own heart. 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. My father was right. And it was true what my mother said. We all fight our own private wars."

-- Narration (Ari) (Section 6, Chapter 21)

Importance: In this quote from the novel's final moments, Ari reflects on and summarizes the truth he has come to realize as the result of everything that's happened: he's freer, and truer to himself, than he ever believed was possible.