

Level III

Honorable Finalist

Benjamin Lee O'Daniel

(Grade 12: Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr)

Letter to author Benjamin Alire Sáenz concerning his novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

Dear Benjamin Sáenz,

Growing up, I denied my sexuality for a long time. Even in middle school I remembered isolating myself from the other boys because I was afraid of having feelings for them and what they would think of me if they knew I had those feelings. I kept telling myself that it wasn't O.K., that I needed to change and wasn't trying hard enough. I think this relates to the character of Dante Quintana in your book because he also denied his sexuality for a long time, and this is one of the reasons how this book has helped me come to terms with my sexuality. However, in middle school, I ended up being extremely socially withdrawn and these fears started playing on my self-conscious about my body because I was a pretty chubby kid in middle school.

Then, at the end of my seventh grade year, I was diagnosed with Leukemia and because of it I stopped paying attention to the real world. I tried to zone out everything by constantly binge watching Netflix and YouTube. I tried to forget about my sexuality and the feelings that plagued me for years. My conscious mind told me I could be straight while my subconscious mind was screaming the opposite at me. When I finally got to high school, I pretty much spent my first semester talking to no one except the occasional teacher. I knew what I was doing wasn't healthy, and I knew I wasn't happy. So, I tried to start pushing myself to go outside my comfort zone because I knew I needed to discover what I was like for myself. So, I started talking to people more and even tried to have a date with a girl (never again). This was the start of me coming out of my shell. In my sophomore year, I started to become more comfortable with my sexuality and I decided I needed to tell someone because I couldn't be closeted anymore. So, after a lot of procrastinating, I finally worked up the courage to tell this super sassy and ornery English teacher I had at the time for public speaking that I was gay, and I felt so much better after that. Over time, I started the process of coming out to more and more people and it gradually became easier and easier. It was during this period of time in my life that I read *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*.

Because I was able to relate to Dante repressing his sexuality and having the courage to come out, his story helped me to come to terms with my own sexuality and I started to gain confidence in my everyday life. Your book helped me see how I was not the only one struggling with my sexuality and how other people were also overcoming social pressures.

By now I was in my junior year and my immediate family all knew that I was gay, but I was still very closeted at school and in general life. Reading your book helped me to come to terms with my sexuality because it helped me to see that there are a lot of other people who are also going through the same things that I am and also trying to find peace with themselves. With this knowledge, I came out to some people at my school and gradually told more and more people. I became more confident and was able to make close friends some of which I am still extremely close with today. I found out that the more I tell people I'm gay, the easier and easier it becomes for me to share that.

I think this book carries a great story that shows young LGBT+ youth that there are other people who are struggling with their sexuality as well as you, and that it's okay to ask for help. I also think this book can help closeted gay people because in the book the main character Dante is closeted and seeing how he comes to terms with his sexuality helps others be comfortable with their sexuality, too.

Sincerely,
Ben O'Daniel, age 17