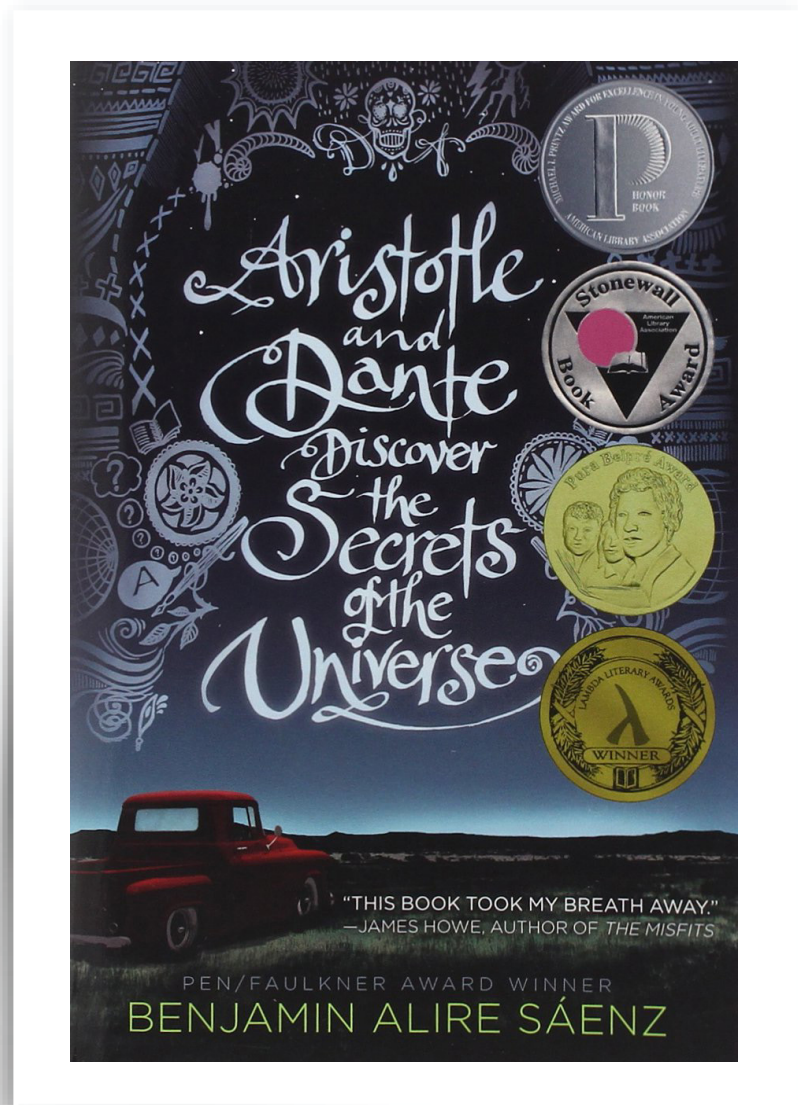


# VAMOS A LEER

teaching latin america through literacy



# VAMOS A LEER

## Educator's Guide

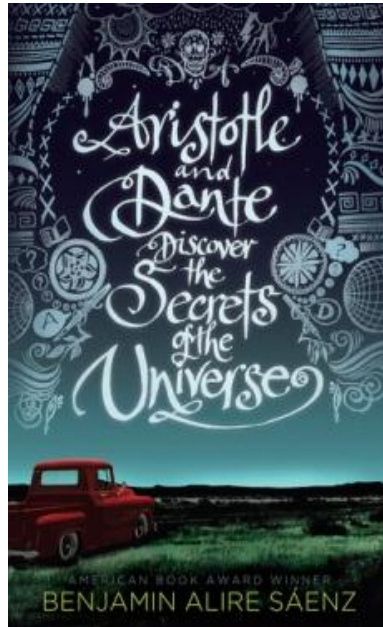
### **Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe**

Written by Benjamin Alire-Sáenz

Published by Simon & Schuster, 2012

ISBN: 9781442408920

Age Level: 12 and up



#### **BOOK SUMMARY**

Aristotle is an angry teen with a brother in prison. Dante is a know-it-all who has an unusual way of looking at the world. When the two meet at the swimming pool, they seem to have nothing in common. But as the loners start spending time together, they discover that they share a special friendship—the kind that changes lives and lasts a lifetime. And it is through this friendship that Ari and Dante will learn the most important truths about themselves and the kind of people they want to be.

#### **AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS:**

- 2013 Lambda Literary Award
- 2013 Stonewall Book Award
- 2013 Printz Honor
- 2013 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, Top Ten
- 2013 Pura Belpré Author Award

## AUTHOR'S CORNER

A little bit about Benjamin Alire Sáenz:

Benjamin Alire Sáenz is a Chicano poet, writer, professor and painter who has lived most of his life near the U.S.-Mexico border. He calls himself a "fronterizo" -- a Spanish word for border resident -- because, he says, the border is integral to his identity and work.

He was born in 1954 in Old Picacho, a small farming village outside of Las Cruces, New Mexico, forty-two miles north of the U.S. / Mexico border. He was the fourth of seven children and was brought up in a traditional Mexican-American Catholic family. He entered the seminary in 1972, a decision that was as much political as it was religious. After concluding his theological studies at the University of Louvain, he was ordained a Catholic priest. Three and a half years later, he left the priesthood.



At the age of 30, he entered the University of Texas at El Paso. He later received a fellowship at the University of Iowa. In 1988, he received a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship in poetry from Stanford University. In 1993, he returned to the border to teach in the bilingual MFA program at UTEP. Currently, Sáenz is a faculty member at UTEP and he continues to write.

Sáenz is the author of a previous book of poetry, *Calendar of Dust*, which won an American Book Award. Cinco Puntos published two of his other books of poetry called [Elegies in Blue](#) and the now out of print, [Dark and Perfect Angels](#). He is the author of numerous novels, books for children and young adults as well as a collection of short stories. His bestselling bilingual children's books include: [A Gift from Papá Diego](#), [Grandma Fina and Her Wonderful Umbrellas](#) and [A Perfect Season for Dreaming](#). His award winning young adult novels are [Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood](#), and of course, [Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe](#). LGBT themes are common in Sáenz's work. In fact, Sáenz, who recently revealed that he is gay, has cited using these themes in his writing as a means to cope with and explore his own sexuality and identity.

(Information compiled from  
[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth\\_coverage/entertainment/poetry/profiles/poet\\_saenz.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/entertainment/poetry/profiles/poet_saenz.html) and  
[http://www.cincopuntos.com/authors\\_detail.sstg?id=3](http://www.cincopuntos.com/authors_detail.sstg?id=3) )

**USING**  
*Aristotle and*

**Dante  
IN THE  
CLASSROOM**

It's no secret that we love Benjamin Alire Sáenz here at Vamos a Leer. He's been a favorite author of mine since I discovered *Sammy and Julianna in Hollywood* two summers ago. This past summer our book group took a break from young adult literature and read Saenz's *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*. I remember starting it with some hesitancy, fearing that I would be disappointed because there was no way it could be as moving as *Sammy & Juliana*. I was wrong. It was amazing. Despite this, I was hesitant again when I heard about *Aristotle and Dante*. All the reviews said it was excellent. It was continually placed on lists of award winning books. I put off reading it, afraid it wouldn't live up to my expectations. Of course, my fears were completely unfounded. It is one of the most beautiful books I've ever read. It may be cliché to say that it is achingly beautiful, but I can't come up with another way to describe it. While I cried through at least the last third of the book, I absolutely loved every minute of reading it.

Just like he did in *Sammy and Juliana*, Saenz has managed to get inside the head of a teenage boy and find a way to communicate the angst, loneliness, anger, and confusion of growing up in a way that no other writer I've read can do. While it's certainly a powerful coming of age story that delves into the complex nature of identity while exploring both race and sexuality, to me, it's really a story about love: the love between friends, the love between parents and children, and the love between two teenage boys. It's so moving because of all of the love stories Saenz brings together in telling the story of Ari and Dante.

While Ari and Dante's relationship develops into something more, it shows the kind of friendship everyone should get to have at least once in their life. Take Ari's description of Dante: "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. I wanted to tell them that he was the first human being aside from my mother who had ever made me want to talk about things that scared me" (p. 308). This is the book that I want to give any student who's ever struggled to accept who they are because they don't fit the mold of what a typical teenager is supposed to be. For most, getting through those teenage years isn't easy. It's certainly not for Ari and Dante. What makes the book so powerful is the way Saenz describes these experiences. One of my favorite quotes is Ari describing trying to come to terms with who he is: "But the worst part was that those words were living inside me. And they were leaking out of me. Words were not things you could control. Not always. I didn't know what was happening to me. Everything was chaos and I was scared" (p. 97).

It's also an important book because it provides a necessary counter narrative to a discourse all too common in schools today. Too often we hear teachers, administrators, and even politicians claiming that the reason so many of our students of color are struggling in school is because their parents don't care about their children's success in the classroom. Numerous studies in education have proved this wrong, yet this line of

thinking continues to be perpetuated. In *Aristotle and Dante* we get a different narrative, and it's an important one. Here we have two sets of loving and supportive Mexican-American parents who are involved in their children's lives. While the reality of this may not be uncommon, it's not a story line that we hear often—either in the news or in the fiction presented in our classrooms. This alone makes it a significant novel for me.

While I mentioned that I cried through much of the book, I don't want that to keep you from reading it. There are parts of the book that are sad, parts that may hurt your heart. But, it's not a sad story. In her own [review of the book](#) Elizabeth Burns writes about how when watching movies her mother will say, "I don't want to know how it happens, but will this have a good ending? Will it be OK for that character?" I can understand that. Sometimes you get so attached to the characters that you're not sure you can bear it if they don't make it through okay. If you understand that fear, then let me assure you, Ari and Dante will be okay.

If you'd like to read what others have thought about the book, check out the links to other reviews below:

- [Kirkus Review](#)
- [School Library Journal Review](#)
- [Book Smugglers](#)
- [Wrapped Up in Books](#)

And to hear more about what the author has to say on the novel, check out the following interview on NPR:

- [Discovering Sexuality Through Teen Lit](#) found at <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/20/172495550/discovering-sexuality-through-teen-lit>

## **LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES**

The following lesson plans are comprised of two sections:

- A short section of suggested activities that can be used before, during or after the reading of the novel which are organized thematically by different subject areas
- Guided reading questions organized by parts of the book and extended response writing prompts. These questions have been written to support the types of reading and critical thinking skills required in standardized reading comprehension tests. The following key words and skills are highlighted: analyze, infer, evaluate, describe, support, explain, summarize, compare, contrast and predict.

In addition to the lesson plans and activities included here, check out other curricula:

- [Simon & Schuster Discussion Guide](#)

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**Common Core Standards Addressed:**

**K-12**

**Reading**

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

**Writing**

Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject

## Social Studies and History

under investigation.

- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Homosexuality is an important theme in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Below are resources that have been created to facilitate teaching about sexuality, gay history, and gay rights.

- Introduction to Sexual Orientation  
A Lesson Plan from Creating Safe Space for GLBTQ Youth: A Toolkit  
Purpose: To learn about issues faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning people and to promote acceptance and respect for all people irrespective of their sexual orientation. Found at: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/for-professionals/lesson-plans-professionals/237?task=view>
- This article from *The Guardian* gives a background discussion and links to lesson plan resources to examine homosexuality in order to help students to grasp the issues, and help schools to combat homophobia. Found at: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/jul/01/learnlessonplans.secondaryschools>
- This article from the NYT (learning blog) provides a number of lesson plans, articles and other resources to aid in teaching about gay history and issues. Found at: [http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/22/teaching-and-learning-about-gay-history-and-issues/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/22/teaching-and-learning-about-gay-history-and-issues/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)
- Teaching Tolerance offers a number of resources for teaching about homosexuality and gay rights. Below are three lesson plans from their cite:
  - The Civil Rights Story Includes Gay Rights  
<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/civil-rights-story-includes-gay-rights>

## Guided Reading Questions

- Bayard Rustin: The Fight for Civil and Gay Rights <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/bayard-rustin-fight-civil-and-gay-rights>
- The Role of Gay Men and Lesbians in the Civil Rights Movement <http://www.tolerance.org/LGBT-CRM>

### Part One: The Different Rules of Summerl Pages 5-56

1. How do you feel about summer? What is your summer break like? Do you agree with Ari? Do you find yourself bored and miserable? (p. 5)
2. Why is reorganizing the food bank important to Ari's mom? (p. 8)
3. What is the story behind the t-shirt that Ari wears to the pool? Why do you think he likes it so much now? What inferences can you make about Ari's relationship with his dad based on this conversation with his mom? (p. 9-10)
4. What kind of guy do you think Ari is? Does he have a lot of friends? How do other guys his age treat him? (p. 12-13)
5. What is Ari's relationship with his siblings like? Why does he call himself a "pseudo only" child? (p. 13)
6. How does Ari feel being around guys? Why? How does he explain it? (p. 15-16)
7. What is Ari and Dante's first conversation like? (p. 17-18)
8. Compare and contrast Ari and Dante based on the way they approach reading—what they like, how they talk about it, etc. (p. 19-20)
9. How does Ari describe his life, his friends and, his relationship with his dad before he meets Dante? (p. 22-23)
10. What is Dante's relationship with his father like? Contrast it with Ari's. (p. 25-26)
11. Dante changes something for Ari when they're in his room reading poetry, what is it?
12. What do you think Ari's statement means: "Words were different when they lived inside of you"? (p. 31) Explain your answer. Do you think you have words living inside of you?
13. How does Ari's father respond to the gift from Dante's family? What surprises Ari about this? Why do you think Dante says "It's about Mexican art. . .So you have to take it."
14. What happens when Ari looks through the telescope? What does he realize? (p. 42)
15. Describe the different ways in which Dante and Ari respond to the boys with the BB guns and the death of the bird? How is this consistent with what we've learned about them so far? (p. 52-55)
16. What does Dante represent for Ari? How is this different from Ari? (p. 56)



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**Part Two: Sparrows Falling from the Skyl Pages 57-108**

1. What kind of dreams does Ari have when he's sick? What do you think these dreams mean? (p. 60-63)
2. How does Ari getting the flu change his relationship with his father? What does his father realize? (p. 62-66)
3. Why do you think Ari can't talk to Dante about his dreams? (p.71-73)
4. What sketch does Dante leave for Ari? How does it represent Ari? How does that make Ari feel? (p. 74-76)
5. As different as Ari and Dante are, they become incredibly close. Why do you think they are so comfortable around each other? (p. 79-80)
6. Why does Ari's friendship with Dante make him feel even more alone? Have you ever felt like Ari where "I didn't want to live in my parents' world and I didn't have a world of my own"? (p. 81)
7. How does Ari's mom describe his father after he returned from the war? (p. 90)
8. What do you think, do we have to understand the people we love? (p. 91)
9. How has Ari's family dealt with his brother's imprisonment? How do you think this has affected Ari? (p. 95-97)
10. Why do you think that it scares Ari that Dante is his first friend? (p. 98)
11. Ari realizes that Mr. Quintana is brave, what makes him brave to Ari? Is Ari's criterion one we typically use to determine bravery? Do you think it's an accurate way to determine bravery? Why or why not? (p. 102)
12. Ari says, "Why would I be sad" in response to Dante's upcoming move. How is this in contrast to the actions he takes when Dante almost gets hit? Which is the truer expression of how Ari feels about Dante? (p. 106, p. 116)

**Part Three: The End of Summer! Pages 109-154**

1. What can Dante remember when he wakes up? Before you read ahead, predict: What do you think happened? (p. 111)
2. What did Ari do when the car almost hit Dante? (p. 117)
3. Why do you think Ari doesn't like to be talked about as a hero? (p. 121-123)
4. What kind of conversation do Ari and Dante's parents have in the hospital? What does Ari learn from this conversation? (p. 123-126)
5. Why do you think Ari makes up the post-op rules? Why does he need them? (p. 128-131)
6. Why do you think Ari can't look at the sketches? Why does the sketch pad make him angry? (p. 132) Why does it bother Ari that Dante gave him "a piece of himself that he had never given to another human being." Explain your answers. (p. 141-142)
7. How do you think Dante has already hurt Ari? Why is Ari so angry with him? (p. 143-144)

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**Part Four: Letters on a Page | Pages 155-232**

1. What do you think of Ari's conversation with Gina and Susie? What do we learn about Ari and how others perceive him from this exchange? (p. 157-160)
2. Do you think Ari is a mess? Do you think he spends too much time alone? Explain your answer. (p. 158)
3. Do you think it is Ari's legs that still hurt or something else? (p. 163)
4. What private war do you think Ari is fighting? (p. 170)
5. Does Ari miss Dante? Explain. (p. 167, p. 169-170)
6. What is life like for Dante in Chicago? (p. 172-176)
7. What do you think about dreams? Do you agree with Ari that dreams represent the things we're thinking about, but that we don't realize we're thinking about? Have you ever had a dream like that? (p. 178)
8. What do you think Ari's dream about Dante and Ileana means? (p. 180)
9. Why do you think Ari wants other people to tell him how they feel, but he doesn't want to return the favor? What does this say about Ari? His trust in other people? (p. 194)
10. What is Ari's life like his junior year? What kinds of things does he do? (p. 195-196, p. 198)
11. What does Ari realize about himself? There is a difference between what he appears to be on the outside and what he's like on the inside. What is it? (p. 200)
12. Why do you think Ari doesn't open the envelope with all of the information about Bernardo? What would you have done? (p. 209)
13. What does Ari learn about Ileana? (p. 222-224)

**Part Five: Remember the Rain | Pages 233-294**

1. How is Ari's mom's anger different than that of Ari or his father? (p. 237)
2. How does Ari feel around Dante's parents? Why do you think it's so different with them than his own parents? (p. 242-244)
3. Why is Dante afraid that he's going to disappoint his parents? Do you think they will be disappointed in him when he tells them he's gay? Why? (p. 252)
4. What do you think Ari is so upset about? Why do you think that it's only Dante that he can talk to? (p. 259-261)
5. Why do you think Ari is so upset that Gina and Susie know the truth about the accident? (p. 264-266)
6. What was Ari's relationship with his Aunt Ophelia like? How much time did he spend with her? Why did he stay with her? (p. 281-283)
7. Why was no one else from the family at Ophelia's funeral? How do Ari's parents feel about Ophelia and the life she chose? (p. 285-286)

**Part Six: All the Secrets of the Universe | Pages 294-359**

1. Why do you think Ari feels safe in the car on the trip back from El Paso? (p. 297-298)
2. What does Ari have to tell Mr. Quintana? (p. 302-303) What did Mr. Quintana suspect about Dante? Why does he think this? Do you think you can tell if someone is in love just by how they look at another person? Explain.
3. What's happened to Dante? (p. 304-306)
4. What have Dante's parents realized about Dante and his feelings for Ari? (p. 307-308)
5. Why do you think Dante didn't run like the other boy? (p. 309)
6. How does Ari deal or cope with what has happened to Dante? What does he say to Daniel? What does he do to Julian? (p. 310-315) Why do you think Ari responds this way? Was this the best way to deal with it? How would you have responded?
7. How do Ari's parents react to what he's done? What do you think his dad means when he tells Ari he's fighting the war in the worst possible way? (p. 317-319)
8. Why do you think Ari's parents choose now to tell him the whole story about Bernardo? (p. 320-324)
9. What does Ari admire about Dante? (p. 333) What does Dante admire about Ari? (p. 334)
10. How does Ari respond to learning that Daniel was over at Dante's? How would you feel about Daniel? Would you forgive him like Dante? (p. 339-341)
11. Why do you think Ari's mom decides they need to start having family meetings? (p. 344)
12. What story does Ari's dad tell him about Vietnam? Why do you think he tells him this story? What do you think he wants Ari to stop running from? (p. 346-348)
13. What have Ari's parents realized about him? (p. 348) How do they respond? What do they say to Ari? (p. 349-350)
14. What advice is Ari's father giving Ari when he says "Dante didn't run. I keep picturing him taking all those blows. But he didn't run"? (p. 350)
15. What has Ari realized about his parents? Do you think this is typically of most teenagers? Why? (p.353-354)
16. How does Ari explain his feelings to Dante? What are the secrets of the universe for Ari? Why do you think Ari feels free now? What's changed? (p. 357-359)

**Reflective  
Writing  
Questions**

1. Read the following questions taken from the very beginning of the novel (before the first chapter).  
*"Why do we smile? Why do we laugh? Why do we feel alone? Why are we sad and confused? Why do we read poetry? Why do we cry when we see a painting? Why is there a riot in the heart when we love? Why do we feel shame? What is that think in the pit of your stomach called desire?"*  
 Choose one question and write an extended response explaining your answer. Then, imagine that Ari or Dante answer the same

- question. How do you think they would respond? Explain.
2. What do you think of Ari’s statement, “*The problem with my life was that it was someone else’s idea*”? Do you think it’s an accurate statement at the beginning of the novel? At the end? Do you feel that way about your life? What could you do to change it?
  3. Dante’s father says the following to him. “*Dante, you’re an intellectual. That’s who you are. Don’t be ashamed of that.*” How would you describe yourself? Exchange intellectual for a word that describes you and explain why you chose it. Have you ever struggled to accept that trait about yourself? Was it ever something you were ashamed of, or still are? Why?
  4. How does Ari’s friendship with Dante change his relationship with his father over the course of the novel? Why do you think his relationship with Dante impacts his relationship with his father?
  5. Why do you think Dante struggles with his identity as a Mexican. Think about the times it comes up in the book (p. 38-39, 44-45, 72, 87 . . . .) is there a pattern in these incidents?
  6. Both Dante and Ari are strong, but in different ways. Ari’s not afraid to fight, and other boys know not to attempt to bully him. Dante has a different kind of strength. He doesn’t fight, but he doesn’t run. Use examples from the novel to compare and contrast the ways in which the two boys demonstrate their strength.
  7. Look at the painting Nighthawks by Edward Hopper that Dante mentions on page 185. Do you think Dante is right, do you think it represents Ari?

**ABOUT US &  
THIS GUIDE**

The Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teaching across grade levels and subject areas so educators can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. For more information and materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit our website at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

Written by staff at the LAII, **Vamos a Leer Educator’s Guides** provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is based upon a book featured in the **Vamos a Leer** book group. For more on **Vamos a Leer**, visit our blog at [bit.ly/vamosaleer](http://bit.ly/vamosaleer). This guide was prepared by Katrina Dillon, LAII Project Assistant, and Neoshia Roemer, LAII Graduate Assistant.

To complement this guide, the LAII oversees the **Vamos a Leer blog**, which provides a space for exploring how to use literature to teach about Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States. In addition to promoting discussion, the blog shares relevant resources and curriculum materials. Visit the blog at the following address: <http://bit.ly/vamosaleer>.

