

Printz Honor Book: Some Remarks

I almost didn't write *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. In the first place, my journey towards coming to terms with my own sexuality has been a painful, difficult, complicated, and conflicted journey. And it has been a long one. To use the parlance of the day, I "came out" at the age of fifty-four. Call me a late bloomer. It is fair to say that I came out to the end of my journey, a wounded man. But what are a few wounds to a writer? Wounds heal—especially when you turn to words to comfort and heal. Had I not arrived at this space of self-acceptance, I certainly would have never conceived of writing a novel of friendship and love between two Latino boys.

In the second place, when I began writing the story of Ari, a young man on the brink of manhood, but also on the brink of self-hatred, I almost abandoned the project altogether. Why? The answer is simple. I was afraid. I was afraid to lay bare the fact of my sexuality in such a public forum. And I was afraid that the character I was creating was too close for comfort. Ari's insecurities and apprehensions too closely mirrored my own. And that really scared me.

I took a break from writing the novel and dedicated myself to working on my book of poems. The book was in a state of disarray. But one morning, while drinking a cup of coffee, I accidentally opened up the file of *Aristotle and Dante*. I started reading it and I thought, I have to finish this. There was something about Ari that I found very compelling and it seemed at that moment that I was reading someone else's work and not my own. It was an odd feeling, strange and wonderful, too, and I knew that I had to

write this book. I thought about all the young boys out there, taking their first steps toward becoming men, and I thought there should be road maps in the world for boys who were born to play by different rules—boys who by no choice of their own, were born gay. I suppose you could say I became a cartographer.

Sometimes, we wrongly speak about homosexuality as if it were a question of choice. What mad man would make such a choice in such a world as this? Rest assured that sexual attractions are innate to individuals. For people who are attracted to members of the opposite sex, sexuality is viewed as a gift. Sadly, for people who are attracted to members of the same sex—well our sexuality is not viewed as a gift by the society at large. In fact, we are viewed as threat. We view love between a man and a woman as sacred and in my the religion I was raised in. Love between a man and a woman is viewed as a sacrament. It is not an accident that so many gay men have to struggle not only to love another man, but to love themselves. *I had to write this book.* I wanted to lay bare the struggles of two boys and the parents who loved them because I wanted my readers to love them too. To embrace them, to suffer with them, to laugh with them, to cry them—to triumph with them.

As I wrote the book, I thought of the thousands if not millions of boys who are struggling with themselves at this very moment, boys who are coming to terms with the secrets of their own bodies. I kept in my mind and in my heart, my journey and the journey of the thousands of Latino men of my generation whose trek towards manhood was awful and painful and tortured. I kept in my mind and in my heart, the painful and sometimes violent journey that this country is taking towards accepting men like me. Men and boys like me are neither demons nor are we deviants. We are

just men. I am just a man. And like all men, I want to be able—under the constitution of this country—I want to be able to pursue happiness. *The pursuit of Happiness*.

I am, in the end, a lucky man. I have an agent, Patricia Moosbrugger, who respects me and believes in me, and respects my work and has an abiding faith in my talent. I suffer from chronic self-doubt. But she has never doubted what I have in me. I have an editor who loved this book and, like Patty, believes in my writing. He and his assistant Navah Wolfe sent my book out into the world with all the resources that a major publishing house can offer. David Gale at Simon and Schuster loved this book, and he put into the hands of anyone and everyone he knew. It's called selling a book by hand. It's called selling a book by heart. It takes a village to write, publish, distribute, and sell a book. So many people at Simon and Schuster helped make this book a success. Young people with names like Venessa and Anthony who commit themselves to putting books into the hands of librarians and educators.

And it takes a village to read and celebrate that book. That village is made up of the American Library Association. That village is made up of YALSA. That village is made up of the Printz committee. That village is made of the young men and the young women who have read and loved this book—and the older gay men who have written me and sent me e-mails and thanked me for writing this book.

The pub date for *Aristotle and Dante* was March 21st of 2012. That was the day my mother died. She was the most important person in my life. I had a copy of the book and held it in front of her a week before she died. She patted her heart and smiled—and at that moment, she looked like a girl. She was so proud me, my mother. I wasn't really able to celebrate the publication of this *Aristotle and Dante* because I was

too busy grieving my mother's death. But when I got a phone call from the Printz committee and the Pura Belpre committee, well, it changed everything for me with regards to *Aristotle and Dante*. Some of you sitting in this room, without knowing it, gave me the opportunity to celebrate the book I had written. You gave me a second chance. You have no idea how much that means to me. You gave me back my book. You, the Printz committee, have not only honored this novel, you have honored my mother and her son. That's who I am: my mother's son. When she was in the 9th grade, she was named the academic student of the year. She got a medal that reads: *For God and Country*. She was born in 1929, and went to school at time when racist attitudes towards Mexicans still flourished. How brilliant must she have been to be named the academic student of the year? My mother gave me that medal—and it remains in my possession. All other awards that have been given to me pale in comparison. Still, it's a beautiful thing to be standing right here at this podium. I'm thrilled to be able to be thank you for recognizing *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Today, I feel like a boy again. Con todo mi Corazon les doy mis gracias. With my whole heart, I give you my thanks.