

Embrace your inner geek

Interview in BookPage by [Eliza Borné](#) published 05/11/2011

Here's a secret about nerds: Most nerds *like* being nerds . . . because being a nerd is fun—as long as you're hanging out with equally smarty-pants friends.

Just look at Gabe, the 10-year-old main character of Elissa Brent Weissman's new novel **Nerd Camp**. Gabe has plans to spend the summer with delightfully geeky friends at the Summer Center for Gifted Enrichment, but his life gets complicated when his dad gets engaged to a woman with a decidedly *ungeeky* son of the same age.

Will Zack think Gabe is the biggest dork on earth, or will the new brothers form an unlikely friendship? Weissman—herself a teacher at Johns Hopkins's Center for Talented Youth—has written a smart, funny book that will appeal to tween guys and girls—and geeks of all ages.

In a Q&A, BookPage got the scoop on Weissman's favorite brain game, book and level of nerdiness.

There's no way you could have written *Nerd Camp* without having been a geek! But what kind of geek were you as a 10-year-old? Band nerd? Quiz Bowl obsessed?

A word nerd, first and foremost! I read like crazy, and I filled notebook after notebook with stories. I even wrote a novel when I was ten. But, like Gabe, I just loved school in general. I was such a nerd that I even “played school” in my free time. I set up a whole classroom in my basement, complete with a chalkboard and worksheets, and I'd teach things to my little brother. I don't know why he put up with it!

Have you ever been to summer camp?

I went to a day camp that was also a travel camp, so we'd take overnight trips to various parts of the country. That meant a lot of time spent on buses and sitting in the woods; telling jokes and ghost stories; trading stickers and candy; and playing hand games. My fondest memories are of the things we did to amuse ourselves. I was a pro at both “Concentration” (which involved naming things alphabetically according to a category while clapping in rhythm—challenging!) and “Concentrate” (which involved patting someone's back and chanting about cracking eggs on their head and stabbing knives in their backs—morbid!). I also loved how seriously we took the legends that went around. Who didn't believe in Bloody Mary or fear hiking Suicide Hill? It's all that free time to play those games that truly makes summer camp so magical.

What do you teach at the Center for Talented Youth? Did any of your students inspire the characters in *Nerd Camp*?

I teach a class for rising fourth and fifth graders called “Writing and Reading Workshop.” None of my characters are based on individual students, but Gabe and the other campers are inspired by them in general. I've had the sweetest, most talented kids every summer. They're inquisitive readers and fantastic writers, and they thrive when they're together in a stimulating academic environment. Like my characters, they can also recite Pi to an impressive number of digits.

Have you ever found yourself in an unlikely friendship, like the relationship between Zack and Gabe?

I have a very close friend who's the Zack to my Gabe. She's fashionable and stylish; I live in jeans and sneakers. She's trendy and in touch with pop culture; I resist trends, if I'm even aware of them. But despite our differences, something about us just clicks. And I know I can always count on her for anything, including a great time when we hang out.

What's your favorite brain game? (Any secret fantasies of appearing on *Jeopardy*?)

My favorite is Balderdash. Making up definitions for crazy words is both brainy and creative, which just about sums me up. And it's no secret that I'd love to appear on *any* gameshow. I submitted my name for both teen *Jeopardy* and college *Jeopardy*, but I never got the chance to audition. I don't think I could cut it on regular *Jeopardy*. Too bad there's no gameshow of Balderdash!

What was your favorite book as a child? Why?

Sixth Grade Secrets by Louis Sachar. I love Louis Sachar's style. It's tight and concise, and he plays with language and structure in brilliant ways. But I didn't think about any of that as a kid. *Sixth Grade Secrets* was my favorite because it made me laugh out loud every time I read it—and I read it *many* times.

What can you tell us about your next project?

I'm working on another middle grade novel. It's about a talented girl who gets herself into some major trouble. But my main project these days is of another sort entirely: being a mom! I have a super smiley four-month-old daughter, and how can I possibly write when she's grinning up at me, wanting to play?