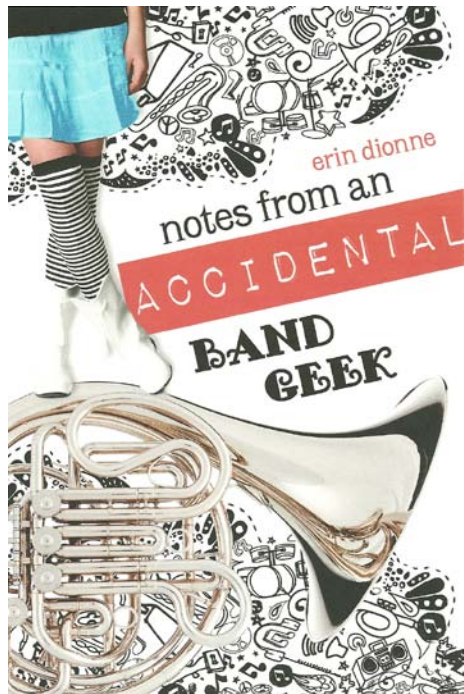


Notes from an Accidental Band Geek

by Erin Dionne



In order for thirteen-year-old French horn-obsessed Elsie Wyatt to qualify for the prestigious summer music camp of her dreams, she must expand her musical horizons and lower her orchestral standards and join—gasp!—the *marching band*. Band is NOT orchestra: They march, they chant, they...cluck? Surviving marching band is going to be *way* harder than Elsie thought.

With smart humor and a feisty, honest, real-girl character, this is a story about stepping out of your parent’s shadow, making friends, and discovering, deep down, what is most important to you—and that, ultimately, everyone looks terrible in a polyester uniform.

“Marching-band kids everywhere will enjoy this believable celebration of a life-changing, musical rite of passage.”—*Kirkus*

“As an eight-year veteran of polyester uniforms, road trips, late night rehearsals and the longest parade routes in history, I believe in the great importance of marching bands and music education. Band can be a life-changing—and in some cases—life-saving opportunity for kids.”—Erin Dionne (That’s me as drum major for my high school marching band in the picture at right.)



“Like” **Notes from an Accidental Band Geek** on Facebook to learn more about the book, where to buy it, and win a cool prize like a Flip camera to tape your marching band in action.

For more information on Erin Dionne’s books go to www.erindionne.com.

Every Band Director knows it...

There's something about marching in a company front at the climax of a field show, blasting the audience with a wall of sound...the hairs on my arms still stand up at the thought.

I marched competitively for all four years of high school—flute for two years, assistant drum major and then drum major my senior year—and all four years at Boston College (piccolo, woodwind section leader, and Executive Committee member). Band brought me out of my shell and turned me into a leader who was willing to take risks to achieve success. My closest friends, roommates, and even my husband all came from my years of marching band.

Band can be transformative: It cultivates discipline, competitive spirit, leadership qualities, a sense of unity, personal responsibility, and growth.

But you already know that.

It's time more people did. Band is the best-kept secret of adolescence, and it's time for a wider audience to understand why. Although my flute has (sadly) gathered dust in my closet since graduation, my memories of drill downs, sweltering practices, and bus trip antics are as vivid as a polyester uniform. This is why I had to write *NOTES FROM AN ACCIDENTAL BAND GEEK*—I wanted to capture and share the funny, poignant, important band experience with my readers.

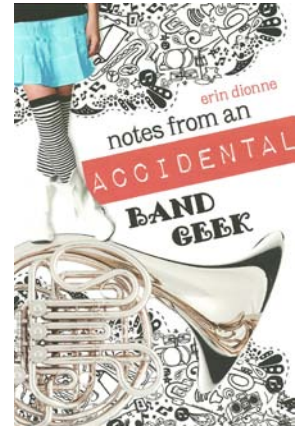
NOTES features a band outsider—a French horn-obsessed orchestral superstar—thrust into the chaotic, alien world of marching band...and how she falls in love with all that entails.

I hope you'll take a few minutes to share the enclosed excerpt with your students, and look for the book at a USSBA event near you this fall. *NOTES* also has its own Facebook page, and if you and your students "Like" it, you'll be in the running to win a Flip video camera for your band.

Thank you for your time, and wishing you a successful season.

Plumes & polyester forever,

Erin Dionne





A Conversation with
Erin Dionne
Author of
**Notes from an
Accidental
Band Geek**

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Q: Your new novel is about life in the marching band. What instrument did you play and why?

A: In high school, I played the flute. I chose that instrument in 4th grade, because my grade school best friend's older sister played it and I thought she was amazing. In college, I was switched (kind of like Elsie) to a new instrument—the piccolo—because you can hear them better on the field. It wasn't as big of an adjustment as Elsie's switch, but it definitely took some getting used to.

Q: Why did you choose the French horn for Elsie to play?

A: The horn is a beautiful sounding instrument, but it's the most awkward looking one to lug around, and you never find them in marching band. So I knew that would lend itself to some funny situations. Also, one of my best friends plays the horn professionally (and played mellophone in marching band), so I had a built-in expert to help me get things right!

Q: Which *Notes from an Accidental Band Geek* character is most like you? Least like you? Why?

A: All of my characters have a little bit of me in them, but I guess Sarah is the most like me—she's the most level-headed of the bunch! With the exception of her drive, Elsie is the *least* like me, which made her fun to write.

Q: The main characters in all your novels seem to be spunky, determined girls. Would Celeste (*Models Don't Eat Chocolate Cookies*), Hamlet (*Total Tragedy of a Girl Named Hamlet*), and Elsie (*Notes from an Accidental Band Geek*) all be friends? Why or why not?

A: Great question! I think Hamlet would get along with both Celeste and Elsie, but the Celeste and Elsie wouldn't get along *at all*. Hamlet and Elsie could relate to their weird/obsessive parents and extreme upbringing, and I think Hamlet and Celeste would bond as "average" girls. Elsie would rub Celeste the wrong way, for sure!

Q: Your characters also struggle with parental expectations as well as their own expectations. Are there any specific experiences from your own childhood that you tapped into when thinking about those themes?

A: I'm really fortunate in that my parents have always been super supportive of everything I've done—but I have friends whose families were very different. So I drew on those memories to help me shape those characters. I hold myself to high standards, though, just like Elsie, so I was able to make that connection to her character.

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Q: You write with a wonderfully comical voice. Where does your sense of humor come from and why have you chosen to write funny novels?

A: Thanks! I'm not sure that I've chosen to write funny novels...I choose to tell stories about these particular characters, and the situations they find themselves in happen to be embarrassing, or humorous and relatable. I think if I sat down and thought, "I need to be funny," it wouldn't happen—it'd be forced. For me, the humor comes organically from the characters. If I plotted it out, it wouldn't feel natural. As for where my humor comes from, I guess my dad. We both have pretty dry senses of humor. In real life, I'm more sarcastic and deadpan than what's found in my novels.

Q: By day, you are a college professor. Why did you decide to write for a middle-grade audience?

A: My secret identity, revealed! (kidding) I love teaching college students, but I didn't really choose to write for a particular readership...it chose me. I've written short stories for older readers, but I keep finding that the voice I feel most comfortable in, and the stories I want to tell, are focused on those junior high years. Most writers, I feel, have something that resonates with them—a theme they want to explore, a voice they're locked into, a time period they enjoy writing about—for me, junior high and its struggles are what resonates.

Q: Can you recommend a ten song playlist for readers to listen to when they read *Notes from an Accidental Band Geek*, or one that complements the novel?

A: So fun!! Here are songs that are featured in the novel as well as a few that I think capture what's going on in the story. Most feature LOTS of brass!

"Long Time" – CAKE

"The Liberty Bell March [Monty Python Theme]" – perf. by the John Phillips Sousa Orchestra

"This Too Shall Pass" –Ok Go

"Ode to Joy" – Beethoven, perf. by the London Symphony

"Ride of the Valkyries" – Wagner, perf. By the London Philharmonic

"December, 1963 (Oh What a Night)" – Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons

"Her Majesty Cry" –Dann Russo (aka Theo Christmas)

"Where did you go?" – The Mighty Mighty Bosstones

"Cantaloop" – Us3

"You Can't Always Get What You Want" – the Rolling Stones

Q: What are your top five favorite bands/albums?

A: Only five?! I listen to everything from Lady Gaga to Paul Simon! Okay...I'm a big Red Hot Chili Peppers fan, so anything by them is in constant rotation on my iPod. The Dropkick Murphys are another favorite, and I also love classic alternative bands like Depeche Mode and The Cure. Lastly, I guess I'd put Aerosmith in my top 5, to represent classic Boston rock.

Q: When not writing or playing music, what is your favorite thing to do?

A: I'm a mom to a 3 year old, so playing with her is my main activity. When I'm not mom-ing, I love to spend time in my garden, hang out with friends, and see live music.

Q: What is your involvement in music like today? Do you notice a significant difference between how the musical arts are presented in schools today versus when you were growing up?

A: I haven't played my instrument in a while, which bums me out, but I have friends who have gone into music education as their careers—and it's a struggle. Budget cuts have forced a lot of school districts to really cut back on the arts, and everyone loses when art and music are missing from the curriculum. On the other hand, I think that means kids are looking more towards community groups to find their musical outlet.

Q: In conjunction with the *Notes from and Accidental Band Geek* release, you've recently partnered with the US Scholastic Band Association. How did that partnership come about?

A: I'm so thrilled to be connected with USSBA! It's a great organization, and the partnership came about in an interesting way: Vince diFiore, trumpet player for the band CAKE, wrote an article about the importance of marching band in kids' lives that I saw on CNN.com (<http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Music/05/31/music.education.cake.difiore/>). I was so struck by the article, I emailed CAKE and told Vince how much I appreciated how he was using his platform to further music education. He responded, passed around the email—CAKE is also partnering with USSBA this season—and voila, USSBA got excited about the book, too! Marching band brings people together in unexpected ways!

This interview is provided by Penguin Young Readers Group and can be reprinted for publication either in full or excerpted as individual questions and answers, as long as they are reprinted in their entirety.

An excerpt from
notes from an ACCIDENTAL
BAND GEEK

by Erin Dionne



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Ensemble was just as torturous. For some reason—you'd think I would have figured it out by now—I expected to see chairs set up for practice.

Uh, no.

At least one hundred of us stood, in yet another arc, on the football field. The drummers were behind the instrumentalists, and in front, at the edge of the field, was the "pit" Sarah had mentioned when we were sitting in the band room: two xylophones, a pair of timpani drums, and some other percussion that I didn't recognize. Off to the side, on the soccer field, I could see a group of girls spinning bright colored flags. Well, *some* were spinning—I guessed the freshmen color guard members were the ones doing all the dropping. I spotted Sarah's blond hair and winced as she nearly hit herself in the head with her pole. The color guard equivalent of bad articulation, I thought, and snickered.

The kid with the sunglasses, the one who'd assigned me my locker and started the clucking humiliation, stood in the center of our arc on a podium above the xylophones.

Was *he* the conductor? They let a student conduct a musical group of this size?

"Totally," said Punk. "Students run nearly every part of the band."

Embarrassed and not realizing that I'd spoken out loud, I glued my lips together.

"Ah-ten-*hut!*" The kid called in a loud, deep voice. Immediately, talking stopped and the upperclassmen snapped into position—as did the whole high brass section.

"Saxes! Flutes, clarinets, and low brass—*what* did you do during sectionals? Get these freshmen to attention!"

Upperclassmen in those sections scurried to help, and the ache settled into my lower back and arms. Steve wasn't kidding when he said we'd be spending a lot of time like this.

When we'd been practicing in the parking lot, we'd had the benefit of the shade of the oak tree. Now, exposed, in the middle of the football field, late summer sun was scorching as it approached noon. The bright sun reflected off the metal bleachers, creating a supersized wok. I was thirsty, hot, and grateful for the sunscreen I'd smeared on before leaving the house.

And still standing at attention.

The conductor put us in parade rest, and then called us

to attention again. We did this several times, until I guess he was satisfied with how we looked and moved. Finally, he put us at ease.

“Welcome to the Screaming Hellcats Marching Band!” he yelled. “I’m AJ, your drum major. We have an intense week ahead of us. Freshmen: You will learn how to be proper members of this group. Returning students: You will help the frosh and memorize your music first, so we can get our field show up and running—and maybe have a shot at beating the Minutemen at our first competition this year!” The band whooped and hollered.

He continued his speech, mentioning something about being too small to audition for the Darcy’s Thanksgiving parade in New York, but we’d have a great season anyway, blah blah blah. I tuned him out. I was too hot. And the stupid mellophone was conducting heat like it was made of brass. Ha-ha. I wished for a cold drink and a pair of sunglasses.

“Okay, let’s do a concert B-flat scale to get going,” AJ said. He put us at attention and yelled, “Instruments *up!*” as he raised his hands.

Five years of playing an instrument, plus eight years of attending concerts, did *not* prepare me for what followed. It was a simple note, but the group was so big there was *power* to it. It was *loud*. My breastbone shook. The note filled me up, pushing against my ears and eyes and *at* me, like a wave. No, not a wave—more like an *envelope* of

sound, something that wrapped around me from all sides.

In the orchestras and student groups that I'd played in, making music was all about control: controlling how well you blended in with others, paying attention to the markings in the music to add drama to the piece. Not this. Not now. This was about pure, face-blasting sound.

And it was so cool.

Each time the note changed, I got the same feeling all over again.

We played some scales—well, everyone else played. I took Steve's advice and just faked it, keeping one eye on Punk to learn the fingerings, still basking in the raw power of the whole group.

However, standing and holding my instrument for so long started to get to me. I felt a little light-headed, and my ears pounded with a sound that had nothing to do with the percussion. A bead of sweat rolled down my back and hit the top of my shorts. My stomach gurgled. It was lunchtime, but thinking of food made me want to hurl.

More sweat popped up on my forehead and back. The band was playing whole notes, holding each one for eight counts.

Why did my breathing feel funny? I wasn't playing.

A gray cloud appeared at the edges of my vision.

Was it going to rain? That'd be nice.



“Chicken? Chicken!”

“Elsie?”

“You all right?”

“What happened?”

“She locked her knees.”

The voices came from far away, and at first I didn’t realize that they were talking about me. My head throbbed. What the heck happened?

I opened my eyes and saw a halo of shadowy heads. I shut my eyes. Was I lying down?

“She’s awake!” That came from Punk.

“Chicken?” AJ, the drum major, chimed in.

“Stop that! Elsie! You okay?” Mr. Sebastian, the band director, said.

I squinched my eyes, then opened them. Six or eight people hovered over me. I was most definitely lying on my back.

“Wha—what happened?” I croaked. I tried to sit up.

“No, no!” Mr. Sebastian gently pushed me back down.

“Stay still. You passed out.”

I *what?*

“I told them not to lock their knees!” A very worried Steve, dreads drooping, came into view. “It traps the blood in your lower body. You faint.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I guess you do.”

Someone passed Steve a cup of water, and Mr. Sebastian held a hand out to me.

“Let’s sit you up. Slowly, okay?”

I nodded as best I could from my lying-down position. I took Mr. Sebastian’s outstretched hand, felt someone else’s arm wrap around my shoulders, and let them guide me into a sitting position. The world whirled. I closed my eyes.

“Easy, easy,” someone—AJ, I think—murmured. “It takes a second.”

I opened my eyes and everything steadied. Steve handed me the cup and I took a grateful sip. The water cooled me from the inside out.

And that’s when I was finally able to look beyond the little group surrounding me. Every member of the band was sitting facing me. Or where I was, behind this clump of people. My face flushed.

What an impression. After today, I reminded myself, I’ll be gone. I won’t have to deal with these people again. I won’t—

“Can you stand up, honey?” Mr. Sebastian placed a large hand on my back and helped me to my feet.

As soon as I stood, everyone—I mean, *everyone*—started cheering and whooping.

“Yeah, Elsie!!”

“Whoooo!”

And then, over everyone, I heard, “Yeah, Zombie Chicken rises!”

That did it. Shouts of “Zombie Chicken!” rang all over the field.

Mr. Sebastian and Steve guided me to the sidelines. The members smiled and waved as I sat on the bleachers. I tried to ignore them, but Steve nudged me.

“They want to know you’re okay,” he whispered in my ear.

Startled that they would even care, I blurted, “Really?” This whole group of people, who instigated my clucking disaster and called me Chicken, was cheering to support me? *Really?*

He nodded. I raised my arm in a wave, and a fresh round of cheers began. AJ returned to the podium. Mr. Sebastian pulled a cell phone from his pocket.

“I think we should call your parents, Elsie.”

The horror of explaining this to my dad—that I’d fainted while pretending to play an instrument other than my horn—raced through me. I switched from feeling overheated to ice cold.

“Uh, no. No, thank you,” I amended. “I’m fine. Really. Maybe I could just . . . sit and watch?” I tried, hoping that would satisfy him.

“Well,” he said, brow wrinkled. “It’s not exactly school policy—”

“But I’m fine. Steve was right. I locked my knees. It won’t happen again,” I said hurriedly.

Of course it wouldn’t happen again. I’d never step on a football field again for as long as I lived.