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## Presenting: Johnny America Interview with Jonathan Holley and Patrick Giroux.

*Interview by Jackie Emory.*

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Johnny America is a very lucky bunny rabbit that lives on the moon between two rivers of wine. At least, that's the story behind this curious comic character. Although the comic never took off, the masters behind the idea, Emily Lawton and Jonathan Holley, took their wine-loving bunny and made him the pin-up boy of their humorous and sometimes naughty short story magazine. On November 20, 2010, co-editor Jonathan Holley and chief designer Patrick Giroux held a issue release event at Hammerpress for their magazine *Johnny America*. Earlier this year, they were one of twelve recipients of the Andy Warhol Foundation-funded Rocket Grants awarded by Kansas City-based Charlotte Street Foundation. Co-editor Emily Lawton is teaching English in Osaka, Japan and did not attend the event.



**Writer Jackie Emory interviews co-editor Jonathan Holley and chief designer Patrick Giroux from magazine *Johnny America*.**

**Present: Did you and Emily always joke around with stories and then decide to actually do something with them as *Johnny America*?**

Jonathan Holley: Yes, that's pretty much how it happened. Emily and I became friends in the mid '90s while we were both students at KU. She majored in creative writing, I studied philosophy. We used to give each other small writing challenges, fun exercises like "write a story with this title" or "one of your characters has to get hit in the head with a skillet." This tradition continued when we moved to New York City as roommates. I moved back in 2002 to study architecture, but we kept these little challenges up over AOL Instant Messenger. One day I challenged her to write a one-off comic zine about a rabbit named Johnny America who lived on the moon between two rivers of wine. Months of goading later, the comic never materialized, but when the idea for publishing some of our exercises on the web came up, the choice for a name and rabbit mascot was instantaneous.

**Present: Who does most of the illustration?**

Holley: Patrick Giroux designed all but one of the covers, and also illustrated the zombie mini-comic we included with issue #3. When it comes to illustrations accompanying the stories, we've historically been fairly light on those. In our fourth issue, we ran several tiny doodles by our friend Stephanie Wakefield. We've used photos and a few dingbats here and there. Our eighth issue is the first one where we really went all out. We're lucky enough to be among the first round of "Rocket Grant" winners, and we really wanted to live up to that honor. We wanted to push the aesthetic package of this issue, and importantly try to broaden our connections with other artists instead of just doing the illustrations ourselves. We reached out to John Lee, a KC Art Institute graduate who now lives in Tennessee. He did an amazing job (see [www.johnleedraws.com](http://www.johnleedraws.com)). We

plan to take the same "guest artist" approach with our next one, teaming up with an illustrator in Lawrence or KC with a compatible aesthetic.

**Present: How long does it take to publish an edition?**

Holley: We aim to publish two issues a year but have never met that goal. *Johnny America's* not our day job. It's our garage band, so to speak; one we take seriously but to which we can commit only limited resources. This year's a little different though. Winning the Rocket Grant has lit a bit of a fire behind us and we're going to do two more issues before the end of summer.

**Present: How do you come up with the cover pages? They seem very intricate?**

Holley: The covers spring from the mind of Patrick Giroux. He might ask me an opinion on some particular during his design process, or show me a sketch, but he is very much the sole author. Usually, the covers have a very loose theme or are based on one idea, and then go from there. I usually don't see the final edit of stories until after we've printed the covers. The cover of issue eight started with the thought of fall foods and then ended up with the Moon Rabbit burrowing through vegetables growing in the ground. I've been lucky to have a rabbit as a mascot, too. It's been a very useful muse.

**Present: How long does it take to hand bind everything together?**

Holley: The binding goes surprisingly quickly because you can turn on a movie and sew about twenty issues before the final credits roll. If we were doing editions of 1,000, it might be impossible. With our distribution being in the low hundreds, it just means you can catch up with the latest happenings on "Bones" and "Frontline" and maybe watch *Howard the Duck*.

**Present: I like the idea that the issue can fit in your back pocket. Whose idea was that?**

Holley: With today's trend toward skinny pants, the "fits in your back pocket"

claim might no longer be true. I've always been a fan of small books and small magazines. There's a time and place for *Gravity's Rainbow*, but it's not on the bus or in the coffee shop.

**Present: Do you carry certain editions around with you to show off, or just to re-read the stories?**

Holley: My co-editor Emily Lawton and I carry around proof copies while we're reading an issues, so we can line-edit and spot typos, but once we've gone to print we've read each story half a dozen times and are ready to read something else. I just finished re-reading *Treasure Island*, which never gets old. I am about to start *Forecast*, a novel by Shya Scanlon which came out a couple of weeks ago.

**Present: What is one of your favorite stories that has gone into *Johnny America*?**

Holley: They're all favorites, or we wouldn't run them. With our latest issue, I'm particularly excited that we're publishing story called, "The Antietam Whore." It's hilarious and has incredibly vivid characterization, but it also has a crudely illustrated drawing of a vagina that would rule it out of consideration at almost every other venue. I'm happy we were able to give it a home.

Patrick Giroux: That's an impossible question, which I choose to ignore.

**Present: Who writes the stories? Do you contribute?**

Holley: We get submissions from all over the world. When *Johnny America* started, it was just Emily, me, and a few friends we harassed into contributing. That quickly changed. We now get around a dozen submissions every week from total strangers kind enough to share their writing with us.

**Present: Was the event at Hammerpress packed? It seems right up your alley to have an event there.**

Holley: Hammerpress was a perfect venue for us. We dig what they do, and hopefully they reciprocate. We were pleased with the crowd, but until people are spilling out their garage doors I think there'll be room for improvement.

**Present: Did you and Patrick really cook hors' d'oeuvres? What were they?**

Holley: Patrick and his wife Caterina did all the work, at they knocked my socks off. In particular, the bacon-wrapped dates and the spicy caramel corn. Patrick Giroux: My wife Caterina came up with all the recipes. We picked out things that we could make in advance or didn't have to be heated beforehand. She and I cooked bacon-wrapped dates filled with Boursin cheese, caponata on crostinis, and a feta dip with pita chips. Caterina worked her magic with the red velvet-cake truffles and the spicy fiddle-faddle. We had mentioned the food on the Rocket Blog (<http://rocketgrants.wordpress.com/>), so we figured we should bring in a cooking "ringer." We were all too happy to have people and fellow artists come down to fill their plates and to check out our 'zine.

**Present: Has *Johnny America* taken off like you had hoped? How many people read it?**

Holley: We've been really pleased with the reception we've gotten, but we'd love to grow a couple times over. You can find it in a few bookshops in KC, Chicago, Baltimore and New York City, and a couple in Australia, but we'd love to make connections with new stores. Right now, we sell 200 copies of each issue. I'd be thrilled if we could reliably sell 500.

**Present: How can we buy one? Or can we subscribe to you?** Holley: You can buy individual issues or subscribe at our online shop, which can be found at [johnnyamerica.net/store/](http://johnnyamerica.net/store/). You can also pick one up at Hammerpress or at Prospero's Books on 39th Street.