

Section	Tea and a Chat With
Name	Joanna and Eric Johnson
Headline	We sit down with the creative couple behind a magical children's story...with a crafting twist
Introduction	<p>When writer and knitter Joanna Johnson and her husband, graphic artist and illustrator Eric, first got together you could say it was love at first craft. Their first book together, <i>Phoebe's Sweater</i>, combined their passions: children's books, artwork, knitting and storytelling. Beautifully illustrated in colourful watercolours by Eric, the book combined a charming family story with companion knitting patterns by Joanna, including not only a toy-sized heroine Phoebe but a matching sweater for her human companion.</p> <p>Their third book, <i>Phoebe's Birthday</i>, released in June in the U.S., has also added a few sewing patterns to complement the knitted ones. Published through their independent company, Slate Falls Press, <i>Mollie Makes</i> is proud to be the exclusive distributor of the book's U.K. release.</p> <p>We met with Joanna and Eric in their house in Loveland, Colorado to hear the stories behind the inspiration for these lovely, creative books....</p>
Body	<p>Q Obviously, Eric is the artist and Joanna is the writer and crafter. What was the spark that inspired you to join those two ideas together?</p> <p>J I have always loved books and reading from a very young age and Eric has always enjoyed drawing and creating characters. When we got married it just seemed natural that someday we would write a children's book together. About four years before we published <i>Phoebe's Sweater</i>, I scratched out a draft of the story idea, but it just didn't seem to be the right time. A few years later, after our third child was born, we brought it out of the desk drawer and started working on it in earnest.</p> <p>Q What were the originating ideas for your books?</p> <p>J Our books are about the challenges that children face as they grow up that may seem very simple to adults but are very significant for children. Our own three children are our greatest inspiration. We talk a lot with them about the characters we are thinking of and love to have their input and ideas. The stories themselves all stem from memories and experiences that were important in all of our lives.</p> <p>Our first book, <i>Phoebe's Sweater</i>, was inspired by our daughter and her journey toward becoming a big sister. Our second book, <i>Freddie's Blanket</i>, is about a little boy who is learning to sleep in his own bed at night and draws directly from our son's experiences. Our newest book,</p>

Phoebe's Birthday, is actually a collaboration of our own childhood memories of spending our summers at the beach with our grandparents and it's about Phoebe learning to swim.

Q Including knitting patterns in a children's book was a novel idea. What inspired that?

J We thought that the concept of a hand-illustrated storybook along with hand-crafted knits would marry very well and we love being able to work very closely together on all of the details of texture and colour to create a book where the story, illustrations and knitted items all mesh .

The hand-knit sweater that Phoebe's mother makes for her daughter in our first book was such an important part of the story that it seemed natural to me to include that sweater pattern. I have always made handmade things for our children, so it seemed obvious then to include the hand-knit toy as well.

The response from our readers has been overwhelming and we feel like we really created something very special and meaningful for adults and children to share together.

Q And for this newest book you've added sewing patterns?

J Although knitting has been my main "craft of choice" over the past several years, I also deeply love to sew, quilt, and embroider. When our daughter was a baby, had a small custom quilting business and created vintage style hand quilted baby quilts for boutique shops. Although I enjoyed that very much, with the busy lives of growing children I found knitting to be a much more portable way to explore my creativity. Working to create sewing patterns for *Phoebe's Birthday* has been a wonderful return to my early love of sewing. I met Amy Butler at a trade show a few years ago and her interest in working with us on a sewing and knitting book was of great encouragement to me, as I am such a big fan of her work. Being able to add both sewing and knitting to our newest book has been a wonderful experience.

Q Eric, the illustrations for both Freddie and Phoebe are very distinctive. After a long time in the commercial art world, including sign writing and graphic design, painting watercolours of cute animals in sweaters seems to be a bit of a digression. Are there any ways that you see the two connected, corporate art and illustration?

E I like to think of myself as a practical artist, making art and design for people who want something done by hand. I've painted murals too, which is like a cross between fine and commercial art. I love illustrating, but lettering and design are really enjoyable for me as well. I'm still developing my technique because I don't have much formal training in illustration, so that's definitely been a learning process for me. I don't see it as corporate versus anything, just as creating something that has a purpose for people who enjoy it. That is what I try to do.

Q Other than your children, what are other inspirations for choosing the particular art to go with which scene?

E Nature in and of itself is intense and amazing and inspirational to me. I like to try to learn as much as I can about nature and the animals I am drawing. When I research the natural world I find many things to add to an illustration and enrich the details of the scene.

As a child I loved the Richard Scarry books with the wide variety of characters going about their normal daily activities. I also have great collection of vintage children's books and admire the work of Beatrix Potter and May Gibbs although I didn't read them when I was younger.

Q Why did you decide to go for independent publishing of your book? How has that experience been?

J We feel like indie publishing "found" us, rather than the other way around. Although we made a few attempts at traditional publishing, it just didn't work out for us. With our books being both children's storybooks and how-to crafts books in one we thought it would take a really unique publisher to understand what we are doing.

Self-publishing has grown so much in the past few years but we still do the vast majority of our work through brick-and-mortar local yarn and craft shops and are just beginning to dabble in digital publishing. I think the internet has certainly levelled the playing field in that we are able to connect with people in new ways, but it truly is the passion of the yarn shops and knitters who love children who are the heart of our success.

Q What are the lessons you have learned?

J One of the biggest pitfalls of indie publishing is thinking you need to do everything by yourself. There's nothing wrong with hiring help, i.e. for editing or handling financials. Oh, what I wish we had known...we could write another book about that! I had worked in publishing before we had children, but everything had changed so much it was like starting from scratch.

E I think the biggest bonus self-publishing is being able to hatch an idea and see it through, artistically and creatively, from a conceptual idea all the way to a final book. We're just trying to figure out how we can make more books....we enjoy it that much.

Q Joanna, when did you learn how to knit? Have you taught your kids to knit yet?

J I learned to knit from my mother and my paternal grandmother at a very young age. My maternal great-grandmother was a skilled needlewoman in all areas and I inherited a lovely collection of her knitting yarn remnants, along with some of her knitting needles, crochet hooks, tatting shuttles and sewing needle book.

I taught our daughter to knit when she was seven and she picked it up quite naturally. Actually, she is really a true fiberista and loves to embroider, crochet and knit. She wanted to learn to weave and spin too and so I have been learning about those things alongside her. I borrow her spinning wheel with great frequency! Our boys don't knit, but our youngest is also fascinated with the spinning wheel and loves to watch me make yarn. Our older son loves to draw and spends a lot of time writing and illustrating his own books.

Q Do you have a favourite knitting trick and/or item of knitting equipment?

J It might seem very insignificant, but I have a small row counter that you slide onto a knitting needle that belonged to my grandmother. A little tape measure rolls up into it. It is just so clever and classy and tidy, just like my Grandma, that it is my favourite knitting notion. Oh, and I am obsessed with knitting totes and bags. My Atenti bag is my current favourite.

Q What are some of your favourite knitting books?

J I cannot say enough good things about the work of Elizabeth Zimmerman, both as a knitter and as a writer. Her designs are so intuitive and yet highly unique and her words are just beautiful to read over and over again. All of Stephanie Pearl-McPhee's books, Maggie Righetti's *Knitting in Plain English*, Barbara Walker's *Treasuries* and Alice Carroll's guidebook have all influenced me greatly.

Q Finally, how do you think Internet sites like Ravelry and The Making Spot have changed the knitting community?

J The Making Spot is new here in the States, but Ravelry has completely changed the way people share information about knitting. It is such a phenomenal resource for researching yarns, patterns and styles of knitting, as well as a way to curate and organize your personal book, project and yarn collections. I dearly love my weekly knitting night with my friends and there is something wonderful about knitting together, but we are often on our phones sharing photos, patterns and new yarns we have discovered on Ravelry!