



IndieCreator: Insights from a Newbie Comic Creator & Other Industry Pros

This is a series of bi-weekly columns by Bob Heske @ Heske Horror, creator of [The Night Projectionist](#), [Cold Blooded Chillers](#), and [2012: Final Prayer](#), featuring interviews and insights from indie comic artists, writers, creators, distributors and visionaries.

CHEW ON THIS: 17 questions with creator/writer John Layman

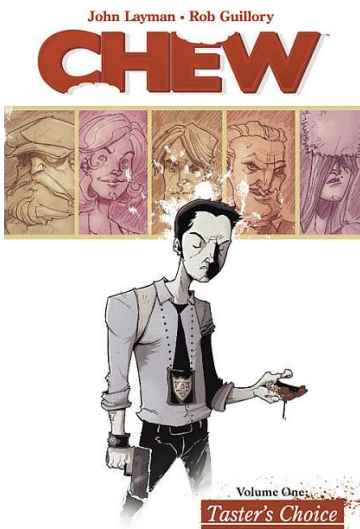
My wife often reminds me that I lack tact and have poor timing. Case in point: After reading CHEW by writer John Layman and artist Rob Guillory, I was so gung-ho that I rushed to [The Mighty Layman Dot Calm](#) (John Layman's blog) and left a comment requesting an interview. Embarrassingly, the post on which I submitted the request for interview was part of a series memorializing a beloved pet that had recently passed, causing one fan to write this appropriate rebuke:

“Geez, Bob, have some respect for the cat. I bet you'd drive an ice-cream truck through JFK's funeral procession if you owned one.”

Touché! Lucky for me, John Layman has thick skin (the man writes about detectives who eat dead people's body parts, for chrissakes) and was gracious enough to do the interview.

CHEW: TASTER'S CHOICE was my favorite graphic read of 2009 (and high on other more notable lists too). What's it about? The official CHEW website describes the premise as follows:

“A twisted new series about cops, crooks, cooks, cannibals and clairvoyants ... Tony Chu is a Cibopathic, which means he gets psychic impressions from whatever he eats. It also means he's a hell of a detective, as long as he doesn't mind nibbling on the corpse of a murder victim.”



TASTER'S CHOICE sets the table (so to speak) by introducing us to the world of Tony Chu, who has been enlisted by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) which has become the most powerful branch of the government after an avian flu pandemic literally creates a chicken prohibition. The FDA needs Tony to digest clues to solve murders and mysteries. Tony teams up with mammoth-sized partner Savoy Mason, also a Cibopath who has a dark secret of his own. Is he mentor or nemesis? Along the way, Tony is hassled by his mean-spirited boss, Mike Applebee, and falls for ravenous food critic Amelia Mintz whose writing is so strong readers can actually taste the food she critiques. Problem is, Tony Chu is supposed to arrest Amelia after a rancid review causes an entire city to projectile vomit. After Amelia saves Tony's butt in a shootout, she suddenly goes on the lam. Even worse, Tony's partner Mason Savoy took a bullet in the fracas. Now Tony is on his own – just after he's eaten something revealing a dangerous enemy that shouldn't be faced without backup.

And let us not forget Tony's chef brother and the food-poisoned senator whose chicken entrails lead to a US/Russian observatory in the Arctic focused on a single, distant Earth-like planet.

Like the X-Files, "the truth is out there" – but you'll have to keep reading to find out what it's all about!

From premise to character to humor to art ... this is a twisted, engrossing, entertaining series that delivers on all counts. Aside from cult fave *Asterios Polyp* by David Mazzucchelli, CHEW garnered more praise than any other comic/graphic creation, including:

- Reaching #7 on the New York Times best sellers list
- Named IGN's Best Indy Comic of 2009
- #4 on Comic Book Resources Top 100 of 2009 list
- #16 on the Best Comics of 2009 Metal-List

Enough gushing. Time to clam up and hear from The Mighty Layman himself. (And to enjoy some great artwork from Chew #9).

Bon Appétit!

1. You made several "Top of 2009" lists. Which surprised you the most?

(JL:) The fact that I made ANY was surprise enough. Nobody expected CHEW to be a hit, myself included.

2. What exactly were you eating when you had your first epiphany for 'CHEW'?

(JL:) I can't remember the genesis of CHEW. I wish I could, because everybody asks and it would make a good story. But, sadly, I don't know where and when I came up with the idea. It was rolling around in my head for a long time before I finally decided to get it off the ground. I was pitching it to Vertigo for the longest time, and when it became clear nobody there was interested, I decided, to hell with it, I would finance it and put it into motion myself.

3. How did you hook up with Rob Guillory? And did you art-direct him on the character designs, or did he totally surprise you?

(JL:) He was introduced to me by a comics writer named [Brandon Jerwa](#). Rob and I went back and forth, and I told him the vibe of the character more than specifics. Like, I would say that Savoy was a big and imposing character, the type that dominates every room he is in. He dresses elegantly, and a bit foppishly, and might wear a beret or a cap, or maybe have a monocle. But Rob really took the descriptions and brought them to life.



4. Your book has received near universal praise. What's your favorite review? Are there any negative reviews you are happy to see eating crow?

(JL:) I always like the reviews of Hannibal Tabu on CBR. Hannibal hates me, and it causes him physical pain to pay me a compliment. But when he likes a Layman-written book, he 'fesses up to it. And I enjoy the pain it must cause him to pay my books compliments.

5. CHEW is an indie-owned monthly put out by Image. How did you get picked up? Did you self fund the books first and then hook a publisher, do did you create a pitch with artist Rob Guillory?

(JL:) I went a weird direction. I know a lot of people in comics, and I was calling around looking for an artist. I called Eric Stephenson and asked him if he had anybody he was knew was looking for a gig on a "cannibal cop/bird flu" book I was working on. Eric said, "No, but I like the idea. Get a decent artist and Image will do the book." So I got really lucky, that way.



6. If CHEW makes it to the big screen, who do you see playing the lead characters – always-always-angry Tony Chu, monster-sized mentor Mason Savoy, and food critic/love interest Amelia Mintz? (Personally, I recommend Neil Patrick Harris as Tony Chu!)

(JL:) Well, Tony is Asian, so if it was up to me, I'd prefer an Asian lead. Rob and I really like Ken Leung from Lost as Tony, with Josh Holloway (Sawyer) as Colby. I like Felicia Day as Amelia, and Robbie Coltraine for Savoy (show below l-r).



7. "Taster's Choice" started out as a 5-issue series. What's the long view for the series? And (though you certainly won't tell us) do you know how you are going to end this down the road?

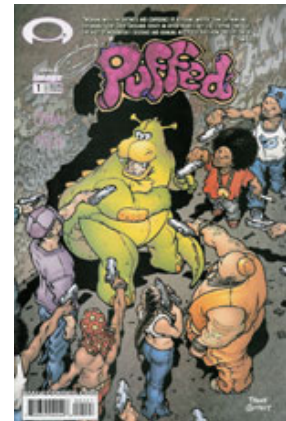
(JL:) Yep, I know the ending. Should go 60 issues, unless I decide to cut it shorter. Will not go any longer.

8. Your book doesn't have a first-person narrator. Instead, you use what you've coined an "omniscient narrative". It works great. How did you come up with this narrative voice?

(JL:) I think I "found my voice" when I did Scarface with Dave Crosland for IDW. I don't like thought balloons, and realized you can have a lot more fun if you narrate – but not over-narrate. And then, with Scarface, I kept it informal and just talked like I like to talk ... it seemed like a good fit, so I kept that tone and style for CHEW.

9. Now that CHEW is a smash success, are there any other works you'll dust off and reintroduce to readers? PUFFED, which was also published by Image and stars a geek named Aaron stuck in a dragon costume who gets the crap beat out of him, dumped in the bad part of the hood, and meets all sorts of street wackos, comes to mind.

(JL:) Yeah, actually, IDW has been kind enough to re-solicit Puffed, and hopefully it will grab a few readers. I've got some other stories on the back burner, and now I finally figure it might be time to let them see the light of day. Sadly, one of my favorite comics, Bay City Jive, was created by me, and is owned by DC. I would love to see it collected, but I don't think DC has any interest in that. DC ain't a fan of the Layman.



10. You began as a comics editor at Wildstorm (a branch of DC Comics). How beneficial was this to creating your own voice? Which of these writers had the greatest impact on you?

(JL:) I would see a lot of scripts from a lot of different writers of all sorts, and I sorta got to pick what I liked and didn't like. It was really satisfying to see a script written by somebody who is in complete control of what they are doing, like a [Kurt Busiek](#) or [Warren Ellis](#). I always have to admit, there were a few writers who showed me what NOT to do, but I won't name any names.

11. The story is set in the future amidst an avian flu epidemic that has outlawed chicken as a food. What were your thoughts when the recent swine flu scare broke out? Reality imitating art?

(JL:) Yeah... it was strange timing. I conceived CHEW way back when everybody was scared of bird flu, and then it turned out to be a mostly big nothing, like the Y2K bug. Funny, by the time CHEW got up and running, swine flu made it timely again.

Not only that, but CHEW seemed a little less unbelievable once countries were in full-fledged panic mode about swine flu. Egypt executed 50,000 pigs over fears. What WOULD a government do if a bird or swine flu started SERIOUSLY killing people. Maybe a food prohibition is not so far out.



12. I've heard CHEW described as a police procedural – think CSI with cannibalistic detectives – but there is also a government conspiracy underfoot (i.e., with the avian flu angle). Are you going to save this big story beat for the end – or the movie?

(JL:) Well, I see it more as a TV series than a movie. Each issue is a self contained episode, but there is a larger over arcing story. Sorta like X-Files, before it petered out. Or like the various season on Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

13. How Tony Chu got his Ciboptath power is a mystery. Do you know yourself at this point, or do these things naturally reveal themselves to you as the story evolves?

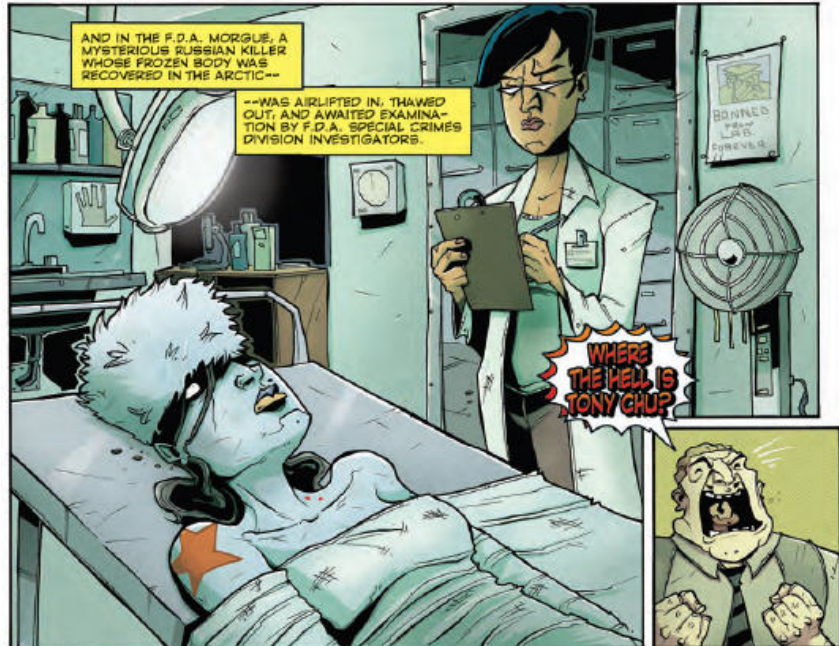
(JL:) Yeah, it will come out eventually, but not really until the end. There won't be any "origin" story about him eating radioactive coleslaw or anything.

14. While you were writing CHEW, you were also working on CHAMPIONS ONLINE. What's it like working on a comic and a RPG at the same time? Is the incredible amount of stress and work the reason why your fictional Tony Chu character is so angry? And do you envision (or "taste") CHEW becoming an RPG at some point in the future?

(JL:) I'm not really an RPG guy. I played some in my youth, but [Champions](#) was sort of a weird fit for me, because everybody at Cryptic was into RPGs and video games, and while some read comics, it was more of a side thing. For me, comics has always been the first thing I want to do, and while I play video games, that is the "side thing" for me.

15. You make gross funny. And your characters are memorable and fun. I especially like the twisted relationship between Tony Chu and his boss, Mike Applebee, who constantly tries to give him the most unappetizing assignments. And the embittered food critic who writes so well her readers can "taste the food" – and who only writes about bad food establishments to sicken them! How do you come up with this stuff?

(JL:) I Dunno. Is just the way my mind works, I guess. It is fun to put your characters through hell, that's for sure.



16. Wrapping up, where can we buy your book and keep abreast of the series?

(JL:) Well, the first trade was heavily ordered and it available at just about all book stores. And the comics come out monthly, available at finer comic book stores everywhere. Honestly, if you don't know where to buy comics, why the hell are you reading this?

17. And what is the grossest thing that John Layman has even eaten?

(JL:) Arbys. It was foul.

Thanks for the interview, John!

NOTE TO READERS: Stop by the InvestComics forum and visit me in the IndieCreator thread to give me your thoughts on this column. If you haven't signed up, you're missing out!

Bob Heske is creator of [The Night Projectionist](#), a vampire horror series by publisher [Studio 407](#) with film rights optioned by [Myriad Pictures](#). Through his Heske Horror shingle, Bob self-published his critically acclaimed horror series [Cold Blooded Chillers](#). Bob's trade paperback [Bone Chiller](#) (a "best of" CBC anthology) won a Bronze medal in the horror category at the 2009 Independent Publisher Book Awards. His "end times" anthology [2012: Final Prayer](#) was released on November 13, 2009. Bob's works are available online at Amazon.com Zaldiva.com, ComixPress, IndyPlanet, HeavyInk, SmallZone, DriveThruComics and YuDu.com (store). You can email Bob at info@coldbloodedchillers.com.

