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Meet 'Knut,' the world's most famous polar bear

Father and daughters pen book about the Berlin Zoo's biggest attraction

BOOKS ON *iVillage*

Knut, a baby polar bear who resides at the Berlin Zoo in Germany, was rejected by his mother at birth and has been raised by zookeeper Thomas Dörflein to the delight of tens of thousands of people who visit the zoo each day. Craig Hatkoff, along with his two best-selling co-author daughters Juliana, 12, and Isabella, 8, tell Knut's story in the children's book "Knut: How One Little Polar Bear Captivated the World." Here's an excerpt.

Introduction

I had the great fortune recently to coauthor with my young daughter Isabella the true story of Owen, an orphaned baby hippo in Kenya who was raised by a giant tortoise named Mzee after the Asian tsunami. When our family heard about another orphan, Knut, the world's cutest polar bear, Isabella and I, joined by my eldest daughter, Juliana, thought we should tell his story, too. Knut had survived through the perseverance not only of a zookeeper named Thomas Dörflein, but also an entire community at Zoo Berlin — a timely environmental metaphor of Man helping Animal to survive. How beautiful!

As Knut's story and the amazing photographs of him circled the globe, Knut became, almost overnight, an international symbol of environmental responsibility. As people fell in love with Knut, it seemed that one little polar bear could help "de-polarize" the hotly debated issue of global warming. In a world where polar bear habitats are rapidly shrinking, Knut reminds us just what we are at risk of losing. He makes it clear that we all breathe the same air at one point or another and encourages us to respect all habitats. In telling Knut's story, perhaps his grandchildren might just be remembered as the descendants of the little cub who made a difference in the world.

Chapter One

One December afternoon, in a cozy, dark enclosure in a zoo in Berlin, Germany, a polar bear cub was born. He was so small that a child could easily have cradled him. His eyes were closed tight, and his pink skin showed through his fine, white fur. He was just a tiny polar bear cub, but he would soon be loved by millions of people around the world.

His name was Knut, and this is his story.

Knut (pronounced K'-noot) was born on December 5, 2006, at Zoo Berlin, one of the world's largest and most respected zoos. Thomas Dörflein, the chief bear keeper, and André Schüle, one of the veterinarians, were on hand when Knut's mother, Tosca, gave birth to two healthy cub brothers. But Thomas and André were anxious. Wild animal mothers don't always know how to take care of their babies. If Tosca wasn't able to be the cubs' mother, Thomas and André would have to try to hand-raise them. Thomas and André watched Tosca carefully, but she showed little interest in the cubs. So after five hours, Thomas carefully gathered them up and rushed them to the small room that would be their first home.



The cubs were placed in an incubator, a small, heated bed. As they hungrily drank their first meal from baby bottles, a new life began for Thomas. He was to devote the next few months to being an around-the-clock foster father.

The cubs were not given names at first, because it is not unusual for newborn animals to survive only a few days. And unfortunately, on the fourth day, one of the cubs suddenly developed a high fever. Within a few hours, he died. It was a very

sad loss. But Thomas and André knew that they had done all they could. Now they focused all their care on the remaining baby.

André checked on the cub several times a day, but it was Thomas who saw to the cub's every need. The cub could drink only about four tablespoons of formula milk at one time. After just two hours, he would yelp in hunger again. Day and night, Thomas would boil water, mix the formula, give the cub his bottle, and settle him back down in the incubator. He also had to clean the cub's bedding and sterilize the bottles. Thomas napped when he could.

It was an exhausting routine. But Thomas was determined to give this cub the best possible chance at survival. He even moved a bed and sleeping bag into the cub's room so that he could always be nearby.

Week after week, the cub's fur grew in more thickly, his tummy got plumper, and his body got stronger. With his bright black eyes he looked around at everything. Until the cub was four weeks old, Thomas continued to feed him every two hours. He also bathed him, brushed him, and rubbed him with baby oil each day. He even played Elvis songs on the guitar for him. Thomas was very, very tired from the endless work, but he came to love the cub as if he were his own baby. And the cub thrived.

The tiny bear became the center of Thomas's life. But he missed his own family at home: his partner, Daniela, and her five-year-old son, Sylvester. They missed him, too. But they felt very proud of him. They visited Thomas every day. And on Christmas Eve, they arrived with a special dinner, presents, and even a beautifully decorated tree. Their love helped to keep Thomas's spirits up.

Finally, when the cub was thirty-two days old, Thomas decided it was time to give him a permanent name. To Thomas, the cub just looked like a "Knut" — and so Knut it was. Thomas and André used their expert knowledge about polar bears to take good care of Knut. When Knut outgrew his incubator, they built a wooden sleeping box for him that was the same size as a mother bear's den — about as big as a very large toy chest. They kept the room dark and warm, since polar bear cubs don't leave their den and don't experience bright light or cold until they are almost three months old. And because mother bears stay by their cubs' side until that age, Thomas stayed with Knut almost every moment. In fact, Thomas only left the zoo for the first time when Knut was four months old — and then just for three days.

Meanwhile, Knut already had thousands of friends outside the zoo. The people of Berlin, and soon all of Germany, fell in love with "Eisbärbaby Knut" and his foster father, Thomas. They were eager to visit Knut at the zoo, but his keepers felt that Knut was still too young to appear in public.

*Excerpted from "Knut: How One Little Polar Bear Captivated the World" by Craig Hatkoff
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