

# The BiblioFiles: Martin Kratt

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library, at Princeton University Library presents, The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is Martin Kratt from the popular PBS Kids animated series, Wild Kratts. Along with his brother Chris, Martin writes, directs, and stars in the show. Wild Kratts is best described as a blend of zoology, biology, science fiction, and comedy.

Team Wild Kratt consists of brothers Martin and Chris; engineer, Aviva; communications expert, Koki; and pilot, Jimmy Z. The team is on a constant Global Road trip, as they visit and observe creatures in their various habitats. Martin and Chris can also become the creatures with the help of their high-tech creature power suits. By touching the creature and pressing a chest disc, the brothers transform into slick, stylized versions of mammals, reptiles, birds, and insects.

Along with the animated portions of the program, there are live action segments in which Martin and Chris introduce the real creatures and habitats featured in the program. In addition to Wild Kratts and their live national tours, the Kratt brothers have produced a number of award winning nature shows including: Kratts' Creatures, Zoboofoo, and Be The Creature.

Wild Kratts has earned them three daytime Emmy nominations for outstanding writing in a children's series. The Kratt brothers are informative, fun, and completely engaging. They have an intrinsic talent for making nonfiction exciting and inspirational. From the smallest insect to the largest mammal, their enthusiasm for creatures is genuine and infectious. I can honestly say I see the creature world in a completely different light after enjoying several seasons of Wild Kratts with my children.

This summer, the Kratts brothers published their first Wild Kratts book, Wild Sea Creatures: Sharks, Whales and Dolphins. Their second book, Wild Reptiles: Snakes, Crocodiles, Lizards, and Turtles, was released this month.

Martin Kratt, welcome to The BiblioFiles!

MARTIN KRATT: Thanks, Dana. It's great to be here!

DR. DANA: When you were the age of your Wild Kratts viewers, were you already having creature related adventures?

MARTIN KRATT: Oh yeah. Well, we grew up in a very exotic place, the wilds of suburban New Jersey [LAUGHTER]. And so, that's where we had our first adventures with box turtles, frogs, deer in the backyard, raccoons. And we were just so interested in any wildlife we could see anywhere, in the back woods, in the park, class trips to the Bronx Zoo. And so when we were

kids, we just tried to learn as much as we could about animals, but there were no wildlife kid shows at the time, when we were kids. They were all adult documentaries, which we loved to watch, but we always wanted to learn more about animals when we were kids.

DR. DANA: How has your appreciation for the animal world changed over time?

MARTIN KRATT: Well, I think we've been studying animal since we were kids. And then both Chris and I, we went to college for biology and zoology. So we've always been learning about animals. And then our first job, my first job after college, was being an assistant on a howler monkey research project. And we started making videos, and traveling all around the world, and I think the one thing I realized is that there's so much to learn about animals. There's always something new to learn. Always a new question. Always some new mystery to find the answer to.

Even now, when we write a Wild Kratts episode, I'll write an episode on walrus, and I think, oh yeah, I know about walrus. They eat clams and live in the Arctic. But then I find out they have this organ, the differential throat sack that they inflate. So it's like a built in life preserver, and they can float on stormy seas, and take naps. I never knew that before. So, I guess the one thing I realized is, it'll take a lifetime to learn about animals, and there'll still be things that we don't know.

I mean there's over eight million species. And I think we've made about, close to 100 creature power suits on Wild Kratts, so there's a lot more to do, and a lot more to learn about in the creature world.

DR. DANA: Tell us about your first television program for kids.

MARTIN KRATT: Well, our first television series was called Kratts' Creatures. And basically, Chris and I, after we-- well, I graduated from college, and Chris was still in college, and we started going to wild locations with professors of mine. We joined Pat Wright in Madagascar, and Dr. Ken Glander in Costa Rica, and Dr. John Turborg in the Manu in the Peruvian Amazon. And we would tag along, help with the research projects, and then videotape everything we saw, and we made our pilot.

And so after that five year process, which included pitching our shows to television stations, and also giving presentations of our videos to school groups around the country, we finally, five years later, got the green light from PBS to do our first wildlife series, Kratts' Creatures, which is specially designed to be for kids and to introduce them to all the amazing animals who share this planet with us.

DR. DANA: Who came up with the concept for Wild Kratts?

MARTIN KRATT: It was interesting. We were doing our Be The Creature, which aired on the National Geographic Channel. And those were one hour documentaries where we would go out in the wild, for a month, and say live with a pack of African wild dogs, and be with them 24/7. And so we'd been doing this for a few years, and we realized on that series and over all our other

shows, that no matter how much time we spent with animals in the wild, filming them, there were always things that we knew they did, these abilities that they had, that we just couldn't get on camera. So on our adventures, we thought, wow if we could show all the stuff in animation, then there would be no limit. We could show anything about animals that we knew about, and that's how we decided to do an animated show, and then we were brainstorming, talking, and then eventually it led to the ideas of creature powers, and Wild Kratts.

DR. DANA: Most of our listeners have an idea of how the process of writing a book works, but I imagine that writing for television is quite different. Can you tell us what writing for children's television is like?

MARTIN KRATT: Well, the way we approach our stories is, we have a long, long, list of animal subjects. And different creatures that we want to do a show about. I mean, we're over 100 episodes into Wild Kratts, and we still haven't done an episode on penguins [LAUGHTER]. So, the animals that we want to feature in our stories is unlimited. But when we pick an animal, and we look at their abilities, and what makes a really cool, what they can do, then we start writing the story based around that.

It's just like kids do in school. You make up a story, and you just write it, and it just kind of grows, and if you have a lot of fun with it, you usually end up with something pretty good.

DR. DANA: In the wild, animals of course eat other animals. This realization can be upsetting for little kids. You've definitely shown animals as predators and prey, in Wild Kratts. Was there much discussion about this aspect of the animal world when you started the show?

MARTIN KRATT: Yeah. Especially on our first show, Kratts' Creatures. Our approach on it is - predation is part of nature. It's part of the natural world. We want to teach kids about it, and show how things work in nature, but we don't really dwell on it. We don't show those sad moments of predation. We'll show that a cheetah will take down a gazelle, but we won't show actually the moment when the cheetah kills the gazelle. So that's how we handle it. We will cover that in a cloud of dust [LAUGHTER].

DR. DANA: The creature power suits are incredibly cool. Whose idea were they, and how much artistic input did you have on their design?

MARTIN KRATT: Chris and I came up with the creature power suit idea, because we were just always attracted to the amazing abilities of animals. The fact that cheetahs can run so fast, that peregrine falcons can stoop and drop out of the sky this incredible speed, that Draco lizards extend their external ribs into these wings that they glide upon. It's endless. The abilities, and talents, that animals have that enable them to survive. So we thought, let's think of them as creature powers, like imagine if you had those abilities, if you had those powers, and that's how the creature power suits came to be. So that we could not only learn about the amazing animals, but we could experience their powers. And that's the creature power suits and that's really at the center of the Wild Kratts experience.

DR. DANA: Did the animators come up with different drafts and different versions of the creature power suits?

MARTIN KRATT: We have a great team of animators, and at the beginning of every episode we have a design meeting where we talk about the creature power suits and how they're going to look, and what features are most important to that animal, that make that creature power suit special.

DR. DANA: Is there any significance with the colors? You're blue. Chris is green. What made you decide on those colors?

MARTIN KRATT: That started actually on Kratts' Creatures, when we went on our trip to Africa. I wore a blue shirt and Chris wore a green shirt. And ever since then, I've always worn a blue shirt, and Chris has always worn a green shirt. On Zoboomafoo, Be the Creature, and now Wild Kratts. And they are our favorite colors, so it's just kind of happened that way.

DR. DANA: What are your philosophies on educating with wild animals? You definitely film them for Wild Kratts, do you also bring them to your live shows?

MARTIN KRATT: Which real animals? Live animals?

DR. DANA: Real live animals, yeah.

MARTIN KRATT: Well basically, we film real live animals in the wild. We also sometimes film animals in zoos, on Zoboomafoo, we would bring animals that were part of educational programs at different zoos and museums, we'd bring them into Animal Junction. In live shows, we've had some animals in live shows, but usually we don't. Like right now, our Wild Kratts live show, is about activating creature powers live and in person on stage. So that's actually, that's a really fun thing we're doing now. We're starting the big Wild Kratts Live tour of North America.

DR. DANA: This is a question from a 7 3/4 year old friend of mine. "Have you ever worked with an animal you were scared of?"

MARTIN KRATT: Well, yeah. The way we look at animals that are predators, or have those creature powers where you could get hurt, it's all about respecting animals and understanding them. We've been filming lions, and one thing we know is that if you're in your Jeep, you can have an open air Jeep, but as long as you're in that Jeep, the lions don't see you as prey. So you can get really close to them and film them. Take an animal like a horse, you know that a horse is annoyed if you understand the sign that those ears go back, it might be annoyed, and it might kick. So you've got to give it its space. So really for us, working with dangerous animals, as long as you understand and respect them, you can be around them.

DR. DANA: Your first book, Wild Sea Creatures: Sharks, Whales, and Dolphins, is a Step Two reader book, which is intended for preschool through grade one. In the book, you describe ten species, discuss predator/prey relationships, and introduce the concept of habitats and camouflage in just 360 words. Your second book, Wild Reptiles: Snakes, Crocodiles, Lizards,

and Turtles, is also a Step Two reader. Is it easier, or more difficult, to write books at the Step Two level?

MARTIN KRATT: On one hand, it's really easy because there's so many animals to choose from that we know that kids will be interested in and in learning about. On the other hand though, the challenge is, and what makes it difficult, is cutting it back and not putting too much information out there. And kind of simplifying it. I think our editor at Random House, his usual first note is, that's too much stuff there. We're going to have to trim it back. Or, we can have all these animals in this book because we only have 30-- how many pages is it? 30 something pages. 32 pages, so that is a challenge. Because like I said, there are over eight million species, and they all have a creature power. And we have maybe 12 swimming creatures in this book!

DR. DANA: You and your brother Chris do live shows together, you star in Wild Kratts together, you write, direct, and produce the show together, you're both given author credit for your two books. What qualities does each of you bring to these collaborations?

MARTIN KRATT: Oh, that's interesting. Well, besides Chris is the climbing brother, and I'm the swimming brother [LAUGHTER]. I think the qualities we bring is that we both really like animals. So we're working on these ideas together, and discussing things, it's just really fun. You know, we're like kids making up a story. And I think we have a lot of fun delivering all this amazing information to kids, because nobody was doing that for us when we were kids. And we know it's something that kids love to learn about, wild animals that share this planet with us. And the other thing we found too, in the course of making our different series, and what we really enjoy, is hearing stories about how kids who learn from Wild Kratts, they go and teach their parents all sorts of things about animals that their parents don't know. And that makes you feel really empowered and I think they really enjoy that.

DR. DANA: Do you and Chris ever play rock-paper-scissors to solve disagreements in the office?

MARTIN KRATT: [LAUGHTER] That would be a good way-- that would be a good thing to do! We should try that sometime. But overall, we get along really well. I might want to do the Tasmanian tiger show, and Chris might too, but if I end up doing it, he's OK with that because he could do the Snow Leopard show, or take the lead on that show.

DR. DANA: Martin Kratt, thank you so much for coming on The Bibliofiles today.

MARTIN KRATT: Thank you, Dana. It was really great to be here. Thanks.

DR. DANA: And if I can ask you one favor...for my children...will you do "What If?" with me?

MARTIN KRATT: Ok, sure!

DR. DANA: On the count of three. Ready? One, two, three...

BOTH: What if?

DR. DANA: [LAUGHTER] Awesome.

MARTIN KRATT: Great!

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