

My Best Friend Bear

Tony Johnston

Joy Allen, illustrator

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The old bear has danced the kookamonga one too many times. Bear's heady existence as the best friend of a small girl is one that most families will recognize. A child's best baby, best quilt, or best bear are the ones most likely to receive the most wear and tear because they are a part of childhood adventures and provide the nightly comfort that only a best security symbol can offer.

So it is with Bear. "When I am in bed and it is dark, my bear says, 'Piffle on the dark. I am here, your fierce friend, Bear.' And then I sleep." The fierce bear, who looks remarkably like the illustrator's own childhood companion also says "poffle" on the thunder, and listens to the child's stories and jokes. As families know, there comes a time in the life of a child's loved "something" when seams give, fur wears off, yarn tassels disappear and the overall look has changed. So it is with Bear. "I have told him so many secrets, his ears are gone. He has laughed at so many jokes, his mouth is gone. He has danced the kooamonga so gaily, his stuff is all danced out. Poor old Bear."

Bear's condition ultimately cannot be overlooked. When the grocer smiles from behind the counter and says, "What a fine monkey," it is time to repair the fierce and loyal friend. Mother comes to the rescue. The little girl, who has subtly aged since the beginning of the story, draws a picture of what Bear used to look like so that her mother won't "make a strange bear that you don't know." Young readers are invited to follow the process as the bear is newly stitched, washed and dried in the sun. This is not a new story idea, but it is done with happy freshness. Allen's exuberant pen and ink, watercolor and colored pencil illustrations are humorous, colorful and tender, and provide a perfect fit with the text.

Johnston, who has written over one hundred books for children, has also had experience in "bear repair."

In the spirit of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, this book celebrates treasuring special toys and makes the reader want to grasp the nearest bear and dance the kookamonga.

LINDA SALISBURY (April 15, 2001)

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