

Picture Books

The Dancing Bears

Pamela Barcita

Pamela Barcita, illustrator

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When the swirling Aurora Borealis appears in Arctic skies, polar bears, the Inuit “king of beasts,” congregate to dance the night away. Inuit folklore says that spirits from the Aurora transform themselves into different animals when they want to dance or play, and polar bears are among their favorites.

In this gentle versified story, the shaggy bears, rendered evocatively in pastels, gather for a joyful night under the swirling greens, blues, and reds of these magnetically charged celestial clouds: “There was no melody / Just simple reverie / Only the stars could see / The waltzing dancing bears.”

Although the book’s descriptive story of bears dancing the night away is geared to four- to eight-year-olds, the book’s preface and concluding material explains Inuit folklore, the science of auroras, and the behavior of polar bears. Older readers can explain to young children, for example, that polar bears are social creatures that form friendships that may last for years. However, the statement that “for the most part, only fat, adult males play dance,” contradicts a romantic subplot that is strongly suggested by the book’s illustrations.

The smaller bear of one pair attracts special notice because it wears a small traditional Inuit carving of a polar bear hanging from a pink string. No other bear wears jewelry, and in a children’s world of pink Barbie aisles and pink camouflage clothing, this color of the string and the fact of the necklace itself signify femininity and suggest heterosexual romance: “They gazed with eyes of jet/ And touched their noses wet/ Then made a pirouette.”

This is the first book that the author, an acclaimed artist who has illustrated over twenty books, has also written. Her pastel illustrations are beautifully rendered, and the narrative verses complement her two-page spreads. In fact, the centerfold contains no words at all and is reminiscent of Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. When the “tired dancing bears”

say goodbye at daybreak, readers are also told to “say good-night.” This book, focused on nighttime events, is a satisfying bedtime story with educational material into which children can grow.

Elizabeth Breau