

Winner of the Christmas 2007 Short Story Competition
Junior Section (under 16)

Author – Hannah Rodgers

With her story

Naomi's Other Gift

It was Christmas Eve and Naomi was sitting on the dust floor of her poor house. Her head was down-turned, her eyes dull. They lacked that sparkle that can normally be found in the eyes of a young child - especially during the days leading up to that very magical time of year...Christmas.

The house was simply fashioned from mud and straw, with only three very small rooms; it was far from a life of luxury. For Naomi there would be no piles of brightly wrapped presents to open - the wonderful Christmases that she had heard about from travellers did not happen to her. There would be no toys or treats to find hiding inside sparkling, glittery paper.

You see, Naomi lived in a really poor country where if you had £10 you would almost be considered a millionaire! Her parents were poor farmers who worked their small plot of land to provide food for themselves. If they were lucky and the season was kind, there would be a little extra that could be used barter for tools and clothes Not the designer outfits so beloved by cosseted Western children - even Naomi's 'best dress' was hand sewn and made out of a course cotton.

It was going to be Christmas tomorrow and she knew that the only present that she would get was an orange. She tried to put on a brave face but she felt sad as she turned the pages of the picture book she had been given. The book showed the happy, smiling face of a little girl with a present whose torn and discarded wrappings revealed a beautiful doll. It was the sort of playmate all little girls dream of. She had long gold hair tied in pretty ponytails and her sparkling pink dress made her look like a magical fairy.

She crept out into the boiling heat cast by the sun's bright rays. Her feet were bare and as her flesh touched the sand it made her flinch and draw up her toes. Naomi walked out to the small stone oven, heated by the fire and checked to see if the bread was rising, becoming golden. It was a hard job because of the heat; it was horrible to have to reach into somewhere where the temperature was even hotter than the afternoon sun.

At the evening drew in, she was relieved that the day's tasks were completed. Her mother ushered her to the small pitcher and bowl to the rear of the house. It contained precious water, drawn from the hand well in the village, and, gratefully, Naomi used it to wash away the dust. Quickly pulling her 'church' dress over her head, she followed her parents to the simple service of worship held the village church.

In the morning, as the sun once more replaced the welcome cool of the night, she awoke and looked in her stocking. Yes, the round shape in the toe told her that contained within was the same orange. However, tucked snugly at its side was something extra its shape, long and thin. Excitedly she dug deep and drew out a tiny carved doll; painted clothes with the golden hair and the pink dress just like in her picture book. It smelt faintly of sweet citrus. She was so happy she had her own little wooden friend to share her hopes and worries.

She got out of bed and went into the other room where her parents were just waking up, clutching a polished pebble she had made as a gift for them.

“Happy Christmas,” they cried and opened their arms to enclose her in a big hug.

It was then she realised that the contents of her stocking weren't the only things she had had for Christmas. She suddenly appreciated that she had two parents who cared for her. Parents who saved precious pennies and made sacrifices to buy the orange and make the little doll toy that she had just opened.

The love of her family was the greatest present that she could wish for. She gently placed her gift into their hands

“Happy Christmas!” she replied.

The End

Hannah is 12 years old and attends St. Mary's R.C. High School in Chesterfield. For over a year she has been a member of the Chesterfield young Writers' Group, run by River Walton, the Derbyshire Poet Laureate.

She has been winning awards for creative writing since she was seven years old. She has twice read her winning work on the Radio 4 programme, 'Go 4 It'. She has won awards at Drama Festivals, poetry writing classes and at the Bassetlaw Writers' annual presentation ceremony

Hannah has been a keen writer from the age of 5. She has a love of words; she reads literature, writes creatively and enjoys the spoken word, regularly performing in local music and drama festivals. She particularly enjoys performing poems written by the Ted Hughes, W. B. Yeats and the World War One poets.

She always has a story 'on the go' fitting in her writing with homework and music practice – she plays the piano and the harp.

Her other main hobby is singing. She has an alto voice and sings with four choirs – three at her school. She is also a member of the training choir for the world-famous Cantamus girls' choir.

She loves songs from musicals – her favourite is 'Singing in the Rain'.