



Book of the Month

***The 13th Gift* by Joanne Huist Smith**

Book Review by Maureen Lang, Friends of the Starkville Library Board Member

I just finished a Christmas book that could become part of my yearly Christmas tradition. *The 13th Gift* by Joanne Hurst Smith is a book that has already found a place deep in my heart, and I hope will speak to yours as well.

The story is an uplifting one, but it is not sappy. It centers around a mom and her three children who have just lost a husband and dad and are trying to grapple with life alone their first Christmas. At the beginning of the story no one is doing very well. I know this sounds depressing, but there is a very fine line between mournful and miraculous. I'm getting ahead of myself....

It all starts thirteen days before Christmas as the Smith family is trying to survive what most families see as a normal frantic morning of oversleeping and trying to get to school on time. As they go out the front door, they see a little poinsettia plant waiting for them on the front porch. Hidden in the leaves is a card with the verse, "On the first day of Christmas my true friends give to you, one Poinsettia for all of you". Although the youngest child is excited by this, her mom wants to throw it in the trash. At this point, the family is reeling with grief and can hardly bear to even think about the holidays.

Slowly throughout the next few days as they receive such gifts as gift wrap, empty gift boxes, cards, and finally six golden apples, grief and negativity start to turn into hope and a desire to not throw away this special season for showing love. The family starts pulling together and helping each other cope.

As the days keep barreling towards Christmas, Jo, the mom realizes through a variety of interactions with strangers, that she has a choice: to help the family come to terms with the change in their family or cave into her own grief and let it to wear each child down more and more. By the time the last gift is discovered on their back porch, the family has embraced the goodwill and love of the season with each other, as well as seeing it spill over into other peoples' lives that are hurting.

Throughout the twelve days of gifting, the family has attempted to discover who these gift givers are. Could it be family members? Former employees of their dad? Teachers? Neighbors? Throughout the



story, the family goes through all kinds of antics, trying to solve this mystery. They climb on the roof, lie on the floor of the garage to spy under the door, turn off all the lights, and even chase a suspicious car across town. Finally, they realize that the identity of the gift givers isn't the most important thing.

What begins as a painful difficult time turns into one that spurs this family into looking outward and as result, the thirteenth gift appears. This is the gift they discover of finding ways to reach out to others not just at Christmas and start a new tradition practicing kindness.

This is not a sugar-coated story, but it is a real one. This family really did experience this miraculous gifting after a painful death. It is one of those books that you will feel richer from reading. Hopefully, we all can learn from their example and practice sharing the thirteenth gift with those we happen to meet.

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