



## TIFF 2020: True Mothers, Limbo, Another Round

Robert Daniels September 18, 2020



A middle class husband and wife, Kiyokazu ([Arata Jura](#)) and Hikari (Aju Makita), find themselves incapable of conceiving. Rather than give up, they enlist an adoption service called Baby Baton. The company—whose slogan is “Pass the baton. Give babies a future”—connects mothers financially unable to care for their children with stable guardians. Kiyokazu and Hikari craft a happy life with their adorable son Asato (Reo Sato), but when his biological mother Hikari (Aju Makita) appears on their doorstep demanding him back, their life is thrown into disarray. [Naomi Kawase](#)’s “**True Mothers**” tries to interweave two powerful themes—teen pregnancy and the longing for family—but ultimately emotionally falters due to its sprawling timeline.

“True Mothers” takes a three-pronged approach. It opens with the adoptive parents in the present day, then flashes back to their decision to adopt, and then recounts the biological mother’s journey to give up her child—all with the tryptic ultimately intertwining. With its placid pacing and meticulous plotting, “True Mothers” could easily play as a miniseries. But as a narrative film, the story is the slowest of slow burns. Rather than larger revelations, the events find their oomph through sun-drenched photography and tranquil shots of nature: cherry blossom trees, the sea, and birds. But those visual elements provide anesthetic to a pain that never felt alive.

It’s not accurate to say that Kawase’s “True Mothers” traverses uneventfully. Certainly the emotional toll of an older couple struggling to conceive plays powerfully—one need only to consider [Tamara Jenkins](#)’ conception dramedy “[Private Life](#)”—but the biological mother’s melodramatic past informs too much of everyone’s relevant present. The winding path causes the final scenes not to play deeply, as they should, but numbingly. Thoughtful performances from a strong cast, Makita’s especially, aren’t enough to float a story that too often sinks in its own misery.