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‘True Mothers’ Review: Naomi Kawase’s Heartbreaking Parenting Saga Goes on Way Too Long

TIFF: A nearly two-and-a-half-hour running time threatens the emotional impact of Kawase’s latest, which nevertheless shimmers with beauty and melancholy.

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Sep 18, 2020 12:20 pm



“True Mothers”

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There’s a happy ending by the time “[True Mothers](#),” [Naomi Kawase](#)’s saga of an adoptive family brought to a crossroads by the unexpected drop-in of their child’s birth mother, cuts to black, but there are plenty of moments of melancholy along the way. And oh, what a time it is, as “True Mothers” clocks in at just under two and a half hours, threatening to kill the emotional impact of this epically scaled, time-spanning, yet specifically intimate drama. Nevertheless, the film shimmers with beauty and sadness despite its length, and the Japanese director’s background as both a photographer and a documentary filmmaker brings a gossamer naturalism to this realistic tale about a young woman’s regrets over abandoning her child years after the fact.

Satoko (Hiromi Nagasaku) and Kiyokazu (Arata Iura) are a middle-class couple grappling with infertility in contemporary Tokyo. While Satoko desperately wants a child, Kiyokazu’s sperm (along with any sort of fathering streak) is blocked, leading them to consider alternate modes of conception. Kiyokazu is too terrified of the idea of an invasive surgery, leading them to call off a trip to Sapporo and stare down the barrel of childlessness. But there’s an option. Satoko and Kiyokazu see a commercial advertising an organization called

Baby Baton, a nonprofit that connects unfit or indifferent new mothers to parents seeking children. Soon, they're buoyed by possibility, and hastening to Hiroshima to collect the baby of their dreams.

But that isn't all, as the film starts to take some twisty narrative loops that circumvent an eventual encounter between Satoko and Hikari (Aju Makita), the young woman who gave the couple their son, Asato. More than half a decade after the adoption, Hikari literally shows up at Satoko's door demanding the return of the child, or a plump sum of money. The film then vaults into Hikari's life as a 14-year-old girl in love for the first time, and whose affections are spoiled by unanticipated pregnancy. Her mother completely flips, and orders Hikari to withdraw from school under the guise that she's in hospital. A gutting scene watches as Hikari is unceremoniously rejected by her boyfriend, crumpling into a weepy heap of herself at his knees.

Hikari's mother's novel solution is to ship her off to Baby Baton, where a kindly staff nurses the young mothers-to-be, and helps them set their children free after birth with little fuss. Hikari finds kinship and closeness in Hiroshima, and it's in these scenes that Kawase, working with cinematographers Yuta Tsukinaga and Naoki Sakakibara, shifts into documentary-like *vérité*, bringing us in closer proximity to Hikari's emotional world. If shots of the sun emerging between parting clouds aren't your bag, look elsewhere. When Hikari finally hands her baby off to Satoko and Kiyokazu, it's with mixed emotions, as it turns out a baby wasn't the only thing gestating inside her — so was remorse over deserting her child.

When Hikari and Satoko finally do confront each other in present day, "True Mothers" actually makes a profound observation about the nature of the adoption process. Neither Satoko nor her husband believe Hikari, now blonder and a bit mangy, is who she says she is, but rather an imposter from nowhere with the express purpose of blackmailing them. That's partly because Satoko insists that Hikari remains, in her own way, as much a part of Asato's life as his adopted parents do. "We're raising him with Hikari," Satoko says. "She gave birth to him, and we're nurturing him." Such a poignant way of defining the life cycle of an adopted child, and its birth mother's contributions to life after the womb, is one of the film's most resonant, hard-hitting moments.

However, the back half of "True Mothers" begins to sag, especially as a rushed criminal subplot involving one of Hikari's acquaintances and a duo of creepy loan sharks gets jammed into the movie, and goes nowhere. It's an odd tonal jolt, and one that sticks out of the film's otherwise Zen stillness, disrupting the tranquility blanketing the rest of the movie. This whole excursion, if eliminated, could have easily cut 20 minutes out of the film to make for a leaner, and more impactful offering, as the beating heart of this story lies within the mothers of the title. The film's foray into genre territory also stunts Aju Makita's hitherto carefully calibrated performance in a fashion that this movie, luxuriant as an ocean breeze and as gentle as a haiku, doesn't call for.

But "True Mothers" wows in the end with an emotional banger of an ending that's a truly devastating convergence of all the film's threads. Kawase ties everything together beautifully in the end, even if the strands coming out of the movie's core get a little gnarled along the way.

"True Mothers" premiered at the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.