

**FILM / RECENSIONI****'True Mothers': An intimate look at two sides of adoption**

JAMES HADFIELD SCRITTORE COLLABORATORE 21 ottobre 2020

Adapted from a lengthy 2015 novel by Mizuki Tsujimura, it's a story of two halves, the first belonging to an affluent middle-aged couple living in Tokyo, and the second to the teenage mother whose child they adopt.

Satoko Kurihara (Hiromi Nagasaku) and husband Kiyokazu (Arata Iura) decide rather late in life that they'd like to start a family, only to discover that he is infertile. When they start to consider adoption, they're led to a non-profit organization that matches them with a birth mother, Hikari Katakura (Aju Makita), who's still in junior high school.

Six years later, following a troubling incident at her son's kindergarten, Satoko is contacted by someone claiming to be the boy's mother. But the woman who arrives at the Kuriharas' apartment — with messy dyed hair, heavy makeup and an embroidered jacket typical of Japanese *yankī* (delinquents) — is unrecognizable from the tearful teen they met years earlier, and the couple accuse her of being an impostor.

Without revealing the woman's true identity, the film then rewinds to show how Hikari became pregnant by her teenage boyfriend. Her conservative parents force her to give the child up for adoption, warning that her life will be ruined otherwise, though it goes off the rails anyway.

Makita is superb at conveying Hikari's downward spiral, transitioning from innocent schoolgirl to a damaged, preternaturally hardened young woman. It's the kind of narrative arc that might once have been treated as a cautionary tale, but the film is unfailingly sympathetic to her plight, even as the story's details tend toward the generic.

Tsujimura's novel prompted a national conversation about adoption, and Kawase treats the topic with the requisite seriousness. At times, her desire to educate viewers in Japan — where child adoption is still rare — threatens to overwhelm the film. A scene in which the Kuriharas watch an emotive TV program on the subject is a little too obvious. However, Hikari's stay at a facility for pregnant mothers, shot with the intimacy of a home movie, is one of the richest sections of the whole movie.

Kawase's visual trademarks are on full display. She's constantly darting away from the action to capture diaphanous shots of cherry blossoms and sun-dappled trees, and multiple scenes are bathed in gauzy morning or late-afternoon light. Nearly every hour seems to be the magic hour.

Much of the story is told in extended flashbacks, and though the film is billed as a mystery, it doesn't sustain much suspense. Hikari's tale is so absorbing that it's hard to keep sight of the Kuriharas during the latter half, and the film never delves too deeply into their conflicted feelings about their adopted son.

Kawase's script (co-written with Izumi Takahashi) mostly follows the structure of the novel, but its occasional use of a more fluid narrative suggests there may have been a better way of bringing the two tales together. As it is, "True Mothers" seems caught between poetry and prose, though there's no denying the power of the story it has to tell.



In 'True Mothers,' Naomi Kawase examines what makes a family