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Review: Naomi Kawase's 'True Mothers' brings sensitivity and lyricism to adoption in Japan



Hiromi Nagasaku and Arata Iura in the movie "True Mothers." (Film Movement)

BY ROBERT ABELE

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Japan's Naomi Kawase is among the tenderest of filmmakers — you can often sense her caring presence off-camera, in a good way — and her latest, "True Mothers," is a fine example of this [Cannes-honored](#) director's sensitivity and lyricism. They're especially strong assets here, because this story of teen pregnancy, adoption, and belonging adapted from a novel by Mizuki Tsujimura is the kind of material that can easily lend itself to melodrama. In Kawase's delicate hands, however, it breathes with an everyday poignancy.

We first meet kind, anxious Satoko (Hiromi Nagasaku) and her devoted husband (Arata Iura) as the parents of 6-year-old Asato, a sweet-faced boy entering kindergarten. An extended flashback fills in an emotionally wrought backstory: after fertility treatments went nowhere, the distraught couple turned to an adoption agency that houses young women with unwanted pregnancies and upon the handing over of the newborn, legally terminates any relationship with the birth mother.

When Satoko gets a phone call one day from a hard-edged female voice demanding her child back or cash to keep Asato's origins private (adoption still carrying a stigma in Japan), the stricken parents wonder, could this be the same high schooler they met right

after Asato's birth? Cue the movie's central backstory, the winding tale of suburban teenager Hikari (a powerful Aju Makita), whose life didn't exactly go as planned.

Hikari's trajectory is its own movie, in a way, which doesn't necessarily lend "True Mothers" an abiding narrative cohesion, but then Kawase's storytelling strengths are micro, not macro. She's interested in the invisible strings between people — in this case a lovestruck schoolgirl and a patient wife — brought together by derailed expectations and a newfound fierceness.

[Kawase's](#) movies aren't short, but it's because feelings are allowed to linger, and here, rightly so. These moments, and her trademark interstitial grace notes of nature's beauty, serve to burnish the deeply felt performances led by Nagasaku and Makita, reminding us that stories like Hikari's and Satoko's are always specific before they're universal. As one character wisely remarks, "Sunsets seem similar, but they're different every day."