



All But Human

The extraordinary children of Hailsham

NEVER LET ME GO: Directed by Mark Romanek. Written by Alex Garland, based on the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. Cinematography, Adam Kimmel. Music, Rachel Portman. Starring Carey Mulligan, Andrew Garfield, Keira Knightley, Sally Hawkins and Charlotte Rampling. Fox Searchlight, 2010. R. 103 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

What makes us human? Is it reading Shakespeare? Or is it the enactment of our personal drama, the ways we hurt ourselves and others? The question of our humanity is at the heart of *Never Let Me Go*, the new film adapted from the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of the Day*). At once science fiction and a dystopian view of the past, *Never Let Me Go* is about three boarding school friends whose fates have been decided in advance. Not in the way of overbearing British parents, say, from last year's *An Education* — which, like *Never Let Me Go*, stars the resplendent Carey Mulligan — but in that way that these friends and their classmates seem to have been created from thin air. Confined to an academy called Hailsham — a name gentle and violent, like an oncoming storm — the children are constantly told they're "special," but they have no parents, last names or real belongings. When a Hailsham visitor reacts to the children with genuine fear, however, any Dickensian images of poor, orphaned students are quickly stanchied, putting us more in the tradition of *Gattaca* than *Great Expectations*.

Never Let Me Go, published in 2005, was a return to form for Ishiguro, in part because he revisits the emotional restraint so central to *Remains of the Day*. Like the butler Stevens, the duty-bound servant in *Remains*, the narrator Kathy (Mulligan) in *Never Let Me Go* is a fanatically devoted "carer," but circumstances have caused her to reflect upon the costs of her devotion. A victim both of science and her unexamined life, she's been trained to subvert her better instincts until, late in the game, she decides to take a look back. The challenge to the filmmakers of *Never Let Me Go* is to capture this repression while creating the urgency of the young, of life struggling against an unseen fate. And what's happened is that director Mark Romanek (*One Hour Photo*)

has so closely adapted the restraint of the novel that the struggle, when it comes, feels too little and too late.

In the first act, Kathy and her friends Ruth and Tommy are at Hailsham as their much younger selves, and while the child actors are perfectly cast, their roles feel preordained from the start. There are attempts to create the levity of youth running amok, the little cruelties as well as the kindnesses, but in general their lives are rote rather than riotous, these extraordinary orphans who someday will be required to "donate." It's a word that comes up periodically, as do others like "guardians" and "originals," but nobody seems willing to educate the children until the arrival of Miss Lucy (an underused Sally Hawkins). After grappling with their misfortune for what seems like an instant, Miss Lucy reveals their fate as if explaining the truth about Santa Claus. Nobody reacts; nor do we. They have always been "told but not told," as Ishiguro puts it in the novel, a fact that works on the page but on screen feels like an opportunity missed.

In the second act, a teenage Kathy, Tommy (Andrew Garfield) and Ruth (Keira Knightley) are relocated to a sullen compound called The Cottages, where they await the start of their donations. A refugee among refugees, Kathy endures her fate alone, forming a weak third corner in a love triangle with Ruth and Tommy, the boy she's always loved. Even as they make a final attempt to avoid their destiny, we never see the trio in their fullness, because according to *Never Let Me Go*, they never possessed it to begin with. Like *The Road*, another adaptation that was cumulative rather than consistent in its power, this is a story perhaps best told as a novel, where difficult truths can be carefully built and subtly assembled, particularly in regard to the interior lives of those complicit in the suppression of truth.

In a final, touching scene, Tommy and Kathy are called "You poor creatures," a gesture of pity meant in both senses of the term. They may be creatures, but were they not human from the start? **EW**

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