

Life with moms

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

Hollywood used to be highly efficient at turning out enjoyable melodramas, but that hasn't been the case for such a long time that *White Oleander* feels like an anomaly. It's a film about the struggles of a teenage girl against unreasonable odds--a mother who's a convicted murderer, and a series of foster homes, each of which poses its own set of challenges.

The movie is a pop-feminist melodrama. The heroine, Astrid (Alison Lohman), was raised by a single mom, Ingrid, a powerful, manipulative woman (Michelle Pfeiffer). Of the four highly distinctive people with whom Astrid forms significant relationships, three are her foster mothers--one (Robin Wright Penn) a sexual competitor, one (Renée Zellweger) a generous and loving person fatally dependent on her husband, and one (Svetlana Efremova) a tough immigrant who not only encourages the girl's independence but expects it. (The fourth is a boy she meets at an orphanage between placements, a graphic artist played touchingly by Patrick Fugit of *Almost Famous*.)

The secondary subject of the film, women's relationships, links up with the first, the protagonist's coming of age, as Astrid comes to see her own development largely in relation--and mostly in opposition--to the older women.

Director Peter Kosminsky has conceived the picture, which is set in southern California, in elegant soft hues. The occasional use of a hand-held camera helps to give it the intimacy of a memoir. The screenplay, adapted by Mary Agnes Donoghue from Janet Fitch's novel, has a complicated structure. It's a flashback (narrated by Astrid) containing fragments of interior flashbacks to the events leading up to Ingrid's imprisonment.

The picture's major drawing card is the array of gifted actresses whose contrasting styles ping off each other just as their characters' personalities do. As Claire, who kills herself when her husband walks out on her, Zellweger has a muzzy likability; she embraces her adolescent charge with the unself-consciousness of someone who defines herself by the people she loves. Penn resists the temptation to play down to

her character, Starr, an uneducated born-again Christian and recovering alcoholic who falls off the wagon when her relationship with her live-in boy friend is threatened; she gives a straight-ahead, meticulously detailed performance. Efremova has an edgy believability, and Lohman, who suggests a combination of early Jessica Lange and early Jennifer Jason Leigh, makes a strong impression.

It's Pfeiffer, however, who walks off with the picture. In Ingrid, she portrays an artist who presents her own ruthlessness and destructiveness as creativity and iconoclasm, and strives to isolate her daughter from everyone else who might care about her.

Like many recent coming-of-age stories, especially those told in the first person, the movie expects us to take the youth's word without question. Astrid accuses Ingrid, who has corresponded with Claire and even invited her for a prison visit, of egging Claire on to suicide--of poisoning her with words just as surely as she poisoned her hapless boy friend with chemicals. (The white oleander of the title is a beautiful but lethal bloom: a metaphor for Ingrid.) As Astrid sees it, her mother eliminates Claire when Astrid comes to love her and feel safe with her.

The script never acknowledges that Ingrid is essentially right about Claire, whom she perceives as a weakling, nor does it raise the possibility that the ultimate betrayal of a child is committed not by Ingrid but by this woman who overdoses on pills while her adolescent foster daughter is sleeping in bed with her.

That Astrid never displays even momentary anger over what Claire has done seems implausible. Her thoughts are only of her grief and rage at the possessive Ingrid. That is, she behaves as a teenage girl might imagine herself behaving in her own version of the story. The movie also mutes Astrid's portion of the blame for some of the instability and violence in her life.

I haven't read Fitch's novel, but my guess is that these problems are inherent in the material. Though they create limitations for the film, it is nevertheless one of the most unusually textured and engaging of recent American movies.