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Reviews

WHITE OLEANDER

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Starring Michelle Pfeiffer, Alison Lohman, Robin Wright Penn, Renee Zellweger, Patrick Fugit, Billy Connolly, Cole Hauser, Noah Wyle and Svetlana Efremova. Directed by Peter Kosminsky. Written by Mary Agnes Donoghue. Produced by John Wells and Hunt Lowry. A Warner Bros. release. Drama. Rated PG-13 for mature thematic elements concerning dysfunctional relationships, drug content, language, sexuality and violence. Running time: 110 min.

A loving single mother with a soul of ice, in "White Oleander" Ingrid (Michelle Pfeiffer) will do anything to keep her pretty, gifted adolescent daughter from falling into mediocrity. The family mantra is that they're special people. Astrid (Alison Lohman) adores her manipulative mom, despite the woman's self-absorption when it comes to cheating boyfriends. When one of these guys (Billy Connolly) winds up dead, Ingrid goes to prison. She's able to continue controlling much of Astrid's life from behind bars, even when the child is thrown into the state foster care system.

Robin Wright Penn's Southerner in too-tight clothes, who aspires to fundamentalist Christianity, brings Astrid into her chaotic household for a short time. Next stop is the well-appointed mansion of an actress with a fragile ego (Renee Zellweger) married to a man (Noah Wyle) she cannot trust. In each new surrounding, the girl changes to suit her surrogate parent. The bleakest stay involves a Russian rag picker (Svetlana Efremova) who takes in charges expected to help keep her business afloat. While living in a sometimes violent juvenile hall, Astrid meets a fellow lost soul named Paul (Patrick Fugit). He becomes the understanding friend she desperately needs, but no one can ever fix those broken maternal bonds. Growing up is a solo occupation.

Adapted from a 1999 novel by Janet Fitch chosen for Oprah Winfrey's book club, the film by English director Peter Kosminsky boasts a plot that sounds as if it might be weeper: a teenager searching for a sense of home and finding only grief. Moreover, with a poster image of four lovely airbrushed blondes, the Warner Bros. publicity machine manages to imply the quartet has seductive intentions. Luckily, "White Oleander" eschews easy sentimentality and presents the women as complex individuals. -*Susan Green*

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