



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WHITE OLEANDER

Janet Fitch's novel *White Oleander* spent weeks on the best-seller lists after it was featured as one of Oprah Winfrey's book club selections. On the surface, the story it tells is very much like some of the true stories heard on TV talk shows, where people reveal the most awful and intimate secrets about themselves and their loved ones. Whether it's fact or fiction, though, being made privy to the darker side of human nature can be an uncomfortable experience.

Watching the film *White Oleander* is quite uncomfortable at times—primarily because the vivid performances make real the lives of some severely damaged and doomed women, all of whom have the potential to damage—and doom—the precocious teenage girl who's the film's central concern. The lovely and extremely self-assured young Alison Lohman is Astrid, the only child of Ingrid, a beautiful, wildly bohemian artist played by Michelle Pfeiffer. Although her role is comparatively small, Pfeiffer makes it one of her best.

Ingrid was never meant to be a single mother, but when she sees an opportunity to mold another being into an image of herself, she dramatically embraces motherhood, lavishing attention on Astrid, filling her head with her own black-and-white code of ethics, her fiercely artistic sensibilities. Astrid obviously adores her mother, but she's also aware of her irrational behavior. Nothing prepares her, however, for the discovery that Ingrid has pursued and killed her cheating boyfriend (the peripherally seen Billy Connolly). This takes place in the first 20 minutes or so of the film, and Ingrid is quickly convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Thus begins Astrid's odyssey through a series of foster homes located in and around Los Angeles. The locale is important. The three surrogate 'mothers' assigned to care for Astrid are characters who might be found only in Southern California. The first is Starr (Robin Wright Penn), a flamboyant, spandex-wearing ex-stripper and ex-alcoholic who has embraced Jesus. She lives in trailer-trash squalor with Ray (Cole Hauser), an easygoing charmer who resists Starr's attempts to get him born again. But will he resist the innocent Astrid? Starr doesn't think so. Her return to the bottle ends in jealous rage and near tragedy—so Astrid is out.

Her next 'placement' is in an upscale Malibu home, with Claire (Renée Zellweger), an emotionally fragile 'actress' whose husband Mark (Noah Wyle) is always away 'on business.' Astrid and Claire quickly become co-dependent friends, sharing girlish secrets, having fun. But this relationship is also doomed. It's not until she winds up with Rena (Svetlana Efremova), a Russian émigré who is the embodiment of self-reliance, that Astrid gains the strength to be herself—although that self is far different than she expected.

In between the emotional roller-coaster rides Astrid takes in 'foster-care hell,' she's

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goes to...

