

FILM REVIEW

Firefly Dreams

DIRECTED, WRITTEN AND EDITED BY JOHN WILLIAMS

PRODUCED BY 100 METER FILMS, JAPAN

<http://www.100meterfilms.com/firefly/>

DVD, 119 MINUTES, COLOR, 2000

JAPANESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

REVIEWED BY MELINDA VARNER

The first problem that confronts a reviewer considering John William's *Firefly Dreams* is one of classification. Filmed in Japan with a native cast, it is unquestionably a product of the Japanese cinematic world. Yet director Williams is a transplanted Englishman residing in Japan. However, no matter how one labels it, *Firefly Dreams* (Japanese title, *Ichiban Utsukushii Natsu*) achieves an astonishing level of stylistic resonance with the work of other contemporary directors whose films explore visions of a rapidly altering Japanese family life.

Naomi (Maho Ukai) is a disaffected seventeen-year-old disinterested in school life and alienated from her parents. When her mother decamps with a lover, Naomi's father sends her to an aunt's home near a rural *onsen* spa. Yumi (Etsuko Kinmata) is a mentally challenged but affectionate cousin whose friendship is initially rejected, and eventually cherished, by Naomi.

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Top: Naomi and Mrs. Koide



Right: Naomi and Yumi saying goodbye

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Resenting the ennui of country life, Naomi befriends the elderly Mrs. Koide, played by acclaimed actress Yoshie Minami. Visiting Mrs. Koide's rustic home, Naomi becomes increasingly intrigued by the woman's mysterious past, even as she observes her sinking into senility. Although the film occasionally waxes sentimental, Williams succeeds in using slow pacing, natural dialogue (offset by excellent subtitles), and the lush visuals of the Horaicho scenes to gently transport both viewers and Naomi on her transformation from city brat to young adult. While her father's suicide brings Naomi abruptly back to urbanity, she has unquestionably been transformed by her relationship with Mrs. Koide.

Firefly Dreams has many applications in a secondary or higher education classroom. The material is age-appropriate (although two short scenes allude, indirectly, to sex), and students readily identify with the seventeen-year-old anti-heroine. The filming locations offer a good opportunity for comparing urban and rural lifestyles in the contemporary Japanese context. Family relationships and value systems may be analyzed through an examination of Naomi's various family groups. Instructors should bear in mind that, while this is a foreigner's interpretation of Japanese life, Williams exhibits a sense of restraint and minimalism that seems stylistically at home in Japan. Overall, this engaging film offers much to educators who teach about Japanese youth culture and family dynamics. ■

MELINDA VARNER teaches courses on Japanese film, language, literature, and culture at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. She also teaches Japanese history at the University of Wyoming, Laramie.

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