

## NOBODY KNOWS

DIRECTED BY KORE-EDA HIROKAZU

COLOR, DVD, 139 MINUTES, 2004

JAPANESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

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A number of Japanese films position their protagonist children or youth in terms of their relationship to school, functioning happily, struggling miserably, or escaping either violently or fantastically.<sup>1</sup>

This is natural considering the extensive time Japanese children spend at school or study. A few films, like the Kitano Takeshi comedy *Kikujiro* (2000) and now Kore-eda Hirokazu's tragedy *Nobody Knows*, make their children yearn for an absent authority rather than wish to escape it, removing them from schools and setting them in search of parents who have left them behind.

*Nobody Knows* is based on an actual incident of child abandonment in Tokyo at the peak of the 1980s' glittering economic bubble, but takes place in the present. It depicts a year in the life of an itinerant single-parent family. The mother Keiko (a Japanese singer/essayist named You) moves her four children, ages four to twelve, into a dingy apartment, confining all but the eldest boy Akira (Yagira Yuya) inside because they've been evicted previously for disturbing the neighbors. Keiko is a failed singer, probably a bar hostess, who moves from job to job, soothing her children with stories of their respective, almost-impressive fathers, and promising that a man to bring stability to their lives is just now in the wings. She repeatedly abandons them with an envelope of cash, returning briefly just as their money runs out.

In a moment of maternal intimacy, Keiko applies red nail polish to the fingers of the eldest daughter, Kyoko (Kitaura Ayu), which later fades from her fingers as the days of the mother's absence stretch on. When Keiko briefly returns, Kyoko reaches for the bottle again, hoping to revive their relationship. The girl drops the bottle and Keiko angrily wipes up spilled nail polish, crimson like blood. Kyoko ponders the spot of polish smeared on her finger as if from a cut. The bond between mother and child is severing; in its place is a wound. A crimson stain later reappears at a crucial moment, as if to blame the absent mother.

Keiko leaves again, and after several months the abandoned children run short of funds. Their utilities are cut off and their diet limited to handouts of food, past its expiration date, pilfered by sympathetic convenience store clerks. Akira, on the verge of adolescence, fears that the family will be broken up if their situation is discovered, yet longs to attend school and make friends. He must budget their money, rustle up meals, and maintain Japanese family rituals, such as cake for Christmas, and *otoshi dama*, a gift of money for the New Year.



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*Nobody Knows* is disturbing because it pointedly estranges Japanese children from the familiar behavioral contours of dependence or rebellion while leaving them in a familiar setting. Akira sees neighborhood school children playing recorders, a universal experience in primary school music classes under Japan's uniform national curriculum, but one Akira lacks because he hasn't been to school. Akira befriends two middle school boys during the summer vacation. They frequent electronic game parlors together and Akira even dares admit them into the forbidden cloister of his adult-free apartment. But when school resumes, the pair don their school uniforms and abandon their increasingly unkempt friend. Meanwhile, the growing, changing Akira and siblings wear the same gradually ill-fitting clothes.

While wistfully observing a little league baseball game, Akira is called from the sidelines to fill in for a missing player attending a *juku*.<sup>2</sup> In the highly competitive field of Japanese youth baseball, that is almost as unlikely as a fan being called from the stands to join a professional Yomiuri Giants game at Tokyo Dome. Actor Yagira handles the scene deftly, though, cautiously gripping the unfamiliar bat, evincing the acting mettle that won him Best Actor of 2004 at Cannes.

The only people Akira trusts are themselves also marginalized, a clumsy convenience store clerk and a lonely truant middle school girl. He befriends the quiet Saki (Kan Hanae), who lives in an upscale condominium home and wears impeccably polished shoes, but who also has unstated issues with bullies from school. The chronic truancy problem in Japan is a phenomenon not primarily of rebellious youth who skip class for more engaging activities, but more often of introverted children like Saki weakened by troubles at home or bullying (*ijime*) from more aggressive peers at school.

The film refers to *enjo kōsai* (literally "supported relationship"), in which an adult Japanese man pays an underage girl for anything from companionship to sex. After making arrangements by email on her cell phone, Saki meets a man at a train station and enters a karaoke box with him, in an apparently chaste encounter. When they reemerge onto the street, he hands her a 10,000 yen note (approximately \$90), which she later gives to Akira, claiming she

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did nothing but sing with the man. Akira takes the cash, but with pain and reluctance.

There are no sexual scenes and almost no violence in *Nobody Knows*. It contains one reference to condom use and pubic hair when Akira hits up two of his erstwhile fathers for money (Scene 5, "Seeking Help"). As the film shows, and as can be brought up in class, paternal contact with and financial support for their children are often limited or nonexistent when Japanese families break up. Japanese divorce rates mirror those of European countries such as Germany and Great Britain, but, unlike them, Japan lacks an effective mechanism to enforce child support payments.<sup>3</sup>

The film's length and languorous pace may bore high school students. It is a story of endurance and gradual disintegration, not of hope. Nevertheless, it can be used for university classes as a foil to films such as *The Family Game*, which may give the impression that all Japanese devote their childhoods to cramming for exams. Amid concerns about a growing gap between rich and poor in Japanese society, Kore-eda's film points to childhood poverty that students may not usually associate with Japan. It usefully highlights the real anxiety in contemporary Japan towards divorce and single parent families, child abuse and abandonment, teenage crime, "supported relationships" and prostitution, bullying and chronic truancy, etc. *Nobody Knows* also counters the outdated canard of Japan's Confucian family values. And it accurately portrays many aspects of quotidian Japanese life. ■

#### NOTES

1. Such films range from comedies or satires like Oigami Naoko's *Yoshino's Barber Shop* (2003), Morita Yoshimitsu's *The Family Game* (1983), Nakae Yuji's *Hotel Hibiscus* (2002), and Ishii Katsuhito's *The Taste of Tea* (2004), to John Williams' more serious *Firefly Dreams* (2001), Ogata Akira's political drama *Boys Choir* (2000), Kitano Takeshi's severe *Kids Return* (1996), Furumaya Tomoyuki's *Bad Company* (2001), Toyoda Toshiaki's *Blue Spring* (2001), and Fusaku Kinji's grotesque *Battle Royale* (2000).
2. *Juku* are private extracurricular tutoring schools or services offering supplemental academic instruction. *Juku* is often translated into "cram school" in English. This may be misleading because cram schools that specifically prepare students for school or university entrance exams are just one subset of a variety of after-school educational institutions in Japan.
3. J. Sean Curtain, "Japanese Child Support Payments in 2002," *Glocom Platform: Japanese Institute of Global Communications*, September 9, 2002. [http://www.glocom.org/special\\_topics/social\\_trends/20020909\\_trends\\_s6/](http://www.glocom.org/special_topics/social_trends/20020909_trends_s6/), accessed October 14, 2005.

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