

Never Let Me Go

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue



Based on the award-winning 2005 novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, who also penned *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go* is that rare story that doesn't rely on a revelatory plot twist to make its thematic point and drive the message home. As adapted by Alex Garland and directed by Mark Romanek, the movie stays faithful to the book's overall intent, even as it gives the three well-defined acts more the sense of taking a journey rather than of reaching a pre-ordained fate.

Unlike some stories tinged with a sci-fi patina, *Never Let Me Go* doesn't take place in a future that is either high tech or postapocalyptic. Rather, it plays out in a parallel universe of sorts, in the U.K. during the 1980s and '90s. Much of what we see looks identifiable and familiar, even at Hailsham, a boarding school occupied by typically rambunctious students and stern-looking professors, including the severe headmistress Miss Emily (Charlotte Rampling.)

The tale revolves around three of the students who are friends, rivals and lovers, depending on which act of the tale you are in. They are Kathy (Carey Mulligan), the soft-spoken narrator of the tale; Tommy (Andrew Garfield), the timid boy Kathy loves from afar; and Ruth (Keira Knightley), the hotheaded beauty who comes between

them. (A trio of talented younger actors does a masterful job of playing the three principals as children.)

But things are not what they seem at Hailsham or anywhere else. These children are being educated not for promising careers but as vessels for future organ donation in a world where most illness has been eradicated. The children, who are clones of "originals" that they never meet, have some sense of what their fate is to be from an early age and are taught to be proud of the service they are providing for the sick and needy. But the stark reality doesn't really strike them until they begin to experience those feelings and emotions that come with approaching maturity, like love, sexual urges and the longing to learn and create.

The story of organ harvesting is less important than one would think, because the story embraces many themes larger than the callousness of a society that engages in such a practice. Once the teenage donors realize just how limited their time is, all the normal joys and woes of the maturation process take on a terrifying immediacy. A slip of the tongue may never be able to be taken back. A missed opportunity for intimacy may never come around again. A betrayal may linger in the mind until someone's last breath.

These realities come into even clearer focus thanks to the intelligent performances of the entire cast. Mulligan in particular seems especially suited for the part of Kathy, a young woman who is easily hurt but too gentle and thoughtful to retaliate. In fact, it is the humanity of children like Kathy that makes *Never Let Me Go* such a moving fable. While the powers-that-be at the school persist in devising ways to figure out if these cloned donors have souls, a look at Kathy's face when she sees Tommy and Ruth holding hands tells us all we need to know about her spiritual core.

By the end of the tale, after watching these three young people try to make the best of a hopeless situation, we have almost forgotten that they are due to be cut open piece by piece and then replaced by a new crop of donors. Instead we realize, with a combination of illumination and horror, that *Never Let Me Go* is not really a tale of science fiction at all—it could just as easily be about children with illnesses who are doomed to too-short lives. The film opens a curtain on the human condition, as do the two lost souls under the bare tree in *Waiting for Godot*. But Kathy, Tommy and Ruth don't have to realize that Godot will never arrive, leaving them to cope with life by themselves. Their tragedy is that they don't even have the time to wait.