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Other People's Children

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Other People's Children* (2022), directed by Rebecca Zlotowski.

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Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



Other People's Children (2022), dir. Rebecca Zlotowski

The whole question of lost chances and last chances lies at the heart of this moving French drama about a schoolteacher in her 40s who has never had children of her own, but when she falls in love with a man of the same age who has a four-year-old daughter she starts to question whether a childless life is really for her. Even when she commits to trying for the child she didn't know she really wanted, and/or had never met 'the right man', the decision is not entirely in her hands as her partner's proximity to his ex-wife and his need to protect his daughter doesn't allow much scope for compromise—even though Rachel (Virginie Efira) keeps telling herself that the arrangement is fine. But she has to make a choice as to whether to put up with a relationship dynamic where she is always fitting around the needs of another, or to take the initiative into her own hands, even though this is invariably going to be at the expense of her own last shot at motherhood.

Along the way, Rachel has to navigate the tricky territory of whether her partner's daughter will accept her as stepmother, and also that if she pushes the motherhood button Ali (Roschdy Zem) might not be interested in hanging around. To an extent, Rachel is trying to prove her worth as a mother-to-be by taking Ali's daughter under her wing, even though little Leila would rather be with her biological mother—and she is too young not to realize that saying this out loud is bound to cause injury. But it may be that there are other accomplishments that Rachel has, which include the pastoral support she offers at-risk students in her school, and the pay-off that this yields some years down the line when she is told—at just the point when she is at her lowest ebb following a relationship breakup—that one former student has appreciated her efforts and specifies just how she has impacted his life. The film is also good at asking whether parenthood is necessarily the best way to define someone's worth and destiny, and the film ends on an open and upbeat note as Rachel embraces her new found worth and autonomy. Indeed, a recurring motif is over the interplay between a long life and a short life, and how this is really in the eye of the beholder.

This life lived at the crossroads is what makes *Other People's Children* such a sophisticated and intelligent drama, which begins with the Eiffel Tower glittering in the background, as if this might turn out to be a romantic comedy. Rachel is Jewish and Ali is of Arab descent, yet this doesn't arise once in the film as a source of conflict, perhaps because it is the universal nature of parenthood that the film wishes to focus on and there are so many aspects like this in the background—another being the reason why Ali and his wife broke up—which the film doesn't even attempt to explore. There is clearly a history to these characters, but the film is more interested in exploring where they are now, at the crossroads of their lives, than in attempting to create a backstory for its own sake. We are privy to how Rachel lost her own mother in a car accident when she was nine, which not only informs her own ambivalence about motherhood but is replicated in

one unexpected scene when she and Ali's daughter become involved in a car wreck. The use of classical music in the soundtrack provides a perfect accompaniment to a tale of love found and lost, and the epilogue gives Rachel a sense of agency and even happiness, when she is no longer caught up in the Ali and Leila love triangle—all of which shows an especially assured confidence and subtlety on the part of director Rebecca Zlotowski.