



MEMBER PICKS

Never Let Me Go

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

‘It quietly stays with you, as it’s so intensely thought-provoking. And it’s beautifully shot too.’ – Alex M, BFI Member

Mark Romanek read Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* on its publication in 2005, and immediately expressed an interest in filming it. The book has been adapted for the screen by Ishiguro’s friend and fellow novelist Alex Garland (who ‘to a degree Kazuo credits with having an influence on the novel’, Romanek says). It’s set in a version of post-war Britain in which the major scientific breakthroughs were in genetics rather than nuclear physics.

‘The whole fabric of society from 1949 is altered only in that one sense, Romanek explains, “that human cloning is an accepted fact, just as we accept – or have to put up with – nuclear energy and nuclear weapons.’ The clones, created to be organ donors and destined to ‘complete’ (die) in early adulthood after the second or third extraction, are regarded as less than human, their shortened individual lives a price worth paying for the extension of the average lifespan. More disturbingly still, the clones themselves, brought up in seclusion at Hailsham (in most respects an ordinary English boarding school) and apprised of the reality of their situation in small doses, make no effort to rebel. ‘It’s about the degree to which people don’t tend to try to escape their fates at all,’ says Romanek. In a sense it’s the anti-*X-Men*.

Ishiguro’s novel is narrated in the first person, almost without affect, by Kathy H. (movingly played by Carey Mulligan in the film), one of the more privileged donors who is given the chance to slightly prolong her own life by acting as a ‘carer’ for the others as they undergo their operations, including Ruth (Keira Knightley), her school friend and rival in love for Tommy (Andrew Garfield). The film is also told from Kathy’s perspective; with minimal recourse to voiceover narration (if not quite as minimal as Romanek would have liked) we learn about the nature of her world as she does. ‘You’ve been told and not told,’ says one of the Hailsham teachers (Sally Hawkins), setting up the film’s essential question: how far the donors’ lack of control truly separates them from the rest of humanity. Romanek calls the film ‘a love story with a subtle patina of science fiction’; like Fincher’s *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), it uses a sci-fi conceit to sharpen its abnormal protagonists’ exposure to normal experience.

For Romanek, the clones’ unwillingness to try to escape their fate is ‘completely evident and implicit’. ‘They’ve been brainwashed since they were children to believe that what they’re doing for this alternative society is a tremendous honour and privilege,’ he explains. ‘People who are told they have six months to live don’t go and climb Machu Picchu. People stay in marriages they’re not happy in and jobs they don’t like. People don’t tend to run, and that’s probably an uncomfortable thing to hold a mirror up to.’

This kind of cognitive dissonance has an immediate political dimension that Romanek says is ‘only a few ticks away’ from Ishiguro’s fiction. ‘The clothes we’re wearing today were probably created by people whose circumstances are infinitely less fortuitous than ours, and we know that, but we go on wearing the clothes. The film asks: when you can’t push that notion to the

back of your mind any more, what becomes important? How do you come to the end of your life and not regret how you lived?’

As in the novel, Kathy’s first-person narrative gives the film a very restricted point of view, yet Romanek insists that he was never tempted to show what Kathy doesn’t tell us. ‘First of all, I didn’t know how I would do it – I just had a strong, instinctive connection and wanted to make a movie of what I’d read,’ he says. ‘Tonally I thought it would be very fresh. I always respond to first-person things – and Polanski does this better than anybody: the single point of view that never veers off. To me there’s a gemlike purity about films that do that – they’re very rare, but you can find them. So my instinct would never be to be more third-person. [The first-person approach] poses a lot of challenges, but you can crack them. Look at *Rosemary’s Baby* or *The Pianist* – I don’t think they break point of view once.’

The constrained or skewed consciousness is the thread that unites Romanek’s three features, and *Never Let Me Go*, he says, breaks from its protagonist’s point of view perhaps once or twice, on neither occasion significantly. Because we see it through Kathy’s mostly incurious eyes, the version of 1980s England that *Never Let Me Go* presents is far from dystopian, but there is something subtly alienating in the background when the donors venture out into the world.

‘I like creating little rules, so that it feels like there’s an architecture about things,’ Romanek says. ‘But it’s our England, so to speak. We toyed around in the design process with having more overt science-fiction tropes, because initially I thought that that’s part of the fun of it – that it’s ostensibly a science-fiction film. But every time it came up, it just never felt right – it felt mannered or distracting.’

Taking his lead from Ishiguro (who was born in Japan but brought up in England after his parents moved here), Romanek prepared by (re-)exposing himself to post-war Japanese cinema – Naruse, Ozu – ‘because if you overlaid that on to a very British story, it would give it a very Ishiguro tone.’ It’s a piece of recontextualisation that recalls his Satellite years [Satellite Films – a division of Propaganda, the production house Romanek cofounded by David Fincher], but that – given the story deals with universal themes – makes one wonder whether it needed to be filmed in England at all. Romanek, however, sees an inherently British angle to the story. ‘There is something about dealing with such big, universal themes in a restrained and understated manner that is – to generalise – a British type of sensibility,’ he points out. ‘I’ve worked here several times, and had an affinity for the place. I had the advantage of being an outsider. I also had a lot of help – I was surrounded by British people who told me when I was veering off course.’

Romanek’s England in *Never Let Me Go*, successfully meshed with Ishiguro’s, is an estranged vision of a country that itself veered off; but rather than offering a warning about what we might accept, it’s a parable about what we already do.

Mark Romanek interviewed by Henry K. Miller, *Sight and Sound*, March 2011

NEVER LET ME GO

Directed by: Mark Romanek
©: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Dune Entertainment III LLC
A DNA Films production
Made in association with: Dune Entertainment
Presented by: Fox Searchlight Pictures
For: DNA Films, Film4
Executive Producers: Alex Garland, Kazuo Ishiguro, Tessa Ross
Produced by: Andrew Macdonald, Allon Reich
Co-producer: Richard Hewitt
Associate Producer: Joanne Smith
For DNA Films: Development Executive: Tanya Phegan
For Film4: Head of Production: Tracey Josephs; *Head of Business Affairs:* Paul Grindey
Production Manager: Donald Sabourin
Production Co-ordinator: Layla Mall
Production Accountant: Linda Gregory
Unit Manager: John Crampton
Supervising Location Manager: Jonah Coombes
Location Manager: Josh Yudkin
Scotland Unit Location Manager: Lloret Dunn
Location Scouts: Helene Lenszer, Asha Sharma
Post-production Supervisor: Clare St John
1st Assistant Director: Lee Grumett
2nd Assistant Director: Jo Tew
2nd Assistant Director: Crowd: Sarah Macfarlane
3rd Assistant Director: Carley Lane
Scotland Unit 3rd Assistant Director: Carol Anne Henderson
Script Supervisor: Diana Dill
Casting by: Kate Dowd
Screenplay by: Alex Garland
Based on the novel by: Kazuo Ishiguro
Cinematography by: Adam Kimmel
B Camera Operators: Julian Morson, Peter Cavaciuti
Steadicam: Julian Morson, Peter Cavaciuti
Gaffer: John Colley
Scotland Unit Gaffer: Steve Arthurs
Rigging Gaffer: Vince Madden
Video Assist: John Paxton
Stills Photographer: Alex Bailey
Visual Effects by: Baseblack (*Visual Effects Supervisor:* Matthew Twyford);
Visual Effects Executive Producer: Stephen Elson; *Visual Effects Producer:* Kate Phillips; *Visual Effects Co-ordinator:* Mark Webb)
Special Effects Supervisor: Sam Conway
Special Effects Technicians: Mark White, Chris Giles, Terry Palmer
Editor: Barney Pilling
Post-production Consultancy: Steve Harrow, Steeple Post Production Services
Production Designer: Mark Digby
Supervising Art Director: Dennis Schnegg
Art Director: Paul Cripps
Set Decorator: Michelle Day
Property Master: Nick Thomas
Construction Manager: Dan Crandon
Costume Designers: Rachael Fleming, Steven Noble
Wardrobe Supervisor: Charlotte Child
Chief Make-up and Hair Designer: Sian Grigg
Hair & Make-up Artists: Bindy Parrish, Tapio Salmi

Scotland Unit Make-up Artist: Sallie Jaye
Prosthetic Artist: Waldo Mason
Title Design: Farrow
Processing and Prints by: DeLuxe
Colour Timer: Alec Gibson
Negative Cutter: Professional Negative Cutting
Music by: Rachel Portman
Violin Solos: Marcia Crayford
Cello Solos: Paul Watkins
Conductor: David Snell
Orchestrators: Jeff Atmajian, Rachel Portman
Music Supervisors: Randall Poster, George Drakoulis
Music Associate: Youki Yamamoto
Sound Design: Glenn Freemantle
Production Sound Mixer: Jim Greenhorn
Boom Operator: Tristan Tarrant
Re-recording Mixers: Mike Dowson, Richard Pryke
Sound Mix Technicians: Adam Scrivener, James Corless
Supervising Sound Editor: Glenn Freemantle
Stunt Co-ordinators: Frank Henson, Nrinder Dhudwar
Medical Adviser: Carlton Jarvis
Unit Publicist: Sarah Clark
Digital Intermediate: Ascent 142 Features
Made at: 3 Mills Studios

Cast

Carey Mulligan (*Kathy H.*)
Andrew Garfield (*Tommy*)
Keira Knightley (*Ruth*)
Isobel Meikle-Small (*young Kathy*)
Ella Purnell (*young Ruth*)
Charlie Rowe (*young Tommy*)
Charlotte Rampling (*Miss Emily*)
Sally Hawkins (*Miss Lucy*)
Nathalie Richard (*Madame*)
Andrea Riseborough (*Chrissie*)
Domhnall Gleeson (*Rodney*)
Kate Bowes Renna (*Miss Geraldine*)
Hannah Sharp (*Amanda*)
Christina Carrafiell (*Laura*)
Oliver Parsons (*Arthur*)
Luke Braynt (*David*)
Fidelis Morgan (*matron*)
Damien Thomas (*doctor*)
Huggy Leaver (*delivery man 1*)
Charles Cork (*delivery man 2*)
Sylvie MacDonald (*bumper crop girl*)
David Sterne (*Keffers*)
Kate Sissons, Amy Lennox (*sitcom girls*)
Anna-Maria Everett (*waitress*)
John Gillespie (*male office worker*)
Rachel Boss (*female office worker*)
Lydia Wilson (*Hannah*)
Monica Dolan (*nurse*)
Chidi Chickwe (*George*)

UK/USA 2010©
105 mins

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