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An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

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## ***Our Little Sister***

**Director** Koreeda Hirokazu

Japan 2015

128m

**Cast:** **Sachi** (Haruka Ayase); **Yoshino** (Masami Nagasawa); **Chika** (Kaho); **Suzu asano** (Suzu Hirose); **Sakashita** (Ryô Kase)

**Original Japanese title** *Umimachi Diary*

**Koreeda Hirokazu follows up *Like Father, Like Son* with an episodic saga of four sisters that's also a hymn to Arcadian virtues.**

Nick Roddick, *Sight and Sound* web exclusive, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015

'Accentuate the positive' hardly begins to sum up the atmosphere in Koreeda Hirokazu's enchanting new film *Our Little Sister* which channels the Japanese master Ozu Yasujiro at the same time as it lovingly recreates the world of Hollywood 1940s family melodramas like *Meet Me in St Louis* and *Little Women*. Calling on the audience to travel with it into the warm embrace of its small-town setting, the film richly repays our suspension of cynicism, thanks not a little to Koreeda's masterly tweaking of the emotional level and the discreet beauty of the cinematography by Takimoto Mikiya (who also shot *Like Father, Like Son*). Indeed only when Takimoto allows himself a flourish – as in a delirious bicycle ride through a tunnel of cherry blossom or an elegant, Ozu-style deep-focus framing of three sisters chatting in the evening, one on the veranda, one in the doorway, one inside the house – does it become clear how carefully controlled the film's visuals otherwise are.

*Our Little Sister* doesn't so much have a plot as string together a series of episodes, reflecting its origin in instalments from *Tales from a Seaside Town* (the film's original Japanese title), an ongoing saga published monthly in the Japanese woman's manga *Flowers Magazine*. With the barest of expositions – a phone call, a train journey, a funeral – we get to the film's definitive set-up: four sisters, ranging in age from 29 to 13, live together in a large, slightly rickety family house in the coastal town of Kamakura.

At first there are but three. Sachi (Ayase Haruka), the oldest at 29, works at the local hospital, where she is about to be put in charge of the new terminal care facility; Yoshino (Nagasawa Masami), 25, works in a bank, and is promoted in the course of the film from teller to loan manager; Chika (Kaho), at 21 the slightly kooky youngest, works in a shoe store. Sachi is having an unrewarding affair with a married man; Yoshino has a string of

temporary lovers; Chika is devoted to her afro-toting boyfriend who used to be a climber but lost four toes on Everest.

Their father long ago went off north with another woman; their mother, ashamed, also deserted them, leaving them to be looked after by their grandmother, who has since died – developments that could betoken trauma but are here accepted as the way things are. Only once, when the mother returns for a memorial service, do anger and resentment bubble briefly to the surface.

Three sisters become four when their father dies and, on a whim, Sachi invites their teenage half-sister Suzu (Hirose Suzu) to come and live in the family house. The house itself, complete with shrine and plum tree, is a major character, both refuge and relic, protecting the sisters from the world but also holding them back from joining it. There is frequently the hint – there if you want to take it (which the monthly readers of *Garden Magazine* probably don't) – that this haven, like childhood, must one day end.

But the film's real appeal lies in its unabashed portrayal of a small-town Arcadia where time is measured by annual events – the cherry blossom, the landing of fresh whitebait in the port, the summer fireworks, the making of plum wine to grandma's recipe from the old tree in the garden – and there are no problems that family and community cannot solve. "If the gods don't take care of it, then I guess we'll have to," says someone.

Even Yoshino's boss at the bank is more concerned with finding solutions to his clients' problems than in calling in the loans. And when a family friend and owner of a nearby diner dies (in, of course, Sachi's hospital), it is important for everyone to know that her cherished recipe for horse mackerel will survive.

Our Little Sister avoids the soul-searching of *Like Father, Like Son*, the home-alone trauma of *Nobody Knows* and even the 'so what?' message of *Air Doll*, focusing instead on the values of tradition and family, which hold together even when both parents abandon their children – twice, in the case of their father, whom Yoshino forgivingly describes as "lovable but hopeless".

Slightly hampered by an episodic structure deriving from its source, *Our Little Sister* is nevertheless a seductive and engrossing celebration of family and community. It may prove a little sentimental for some tastes; but, like the plum wine that features repeatedly, the film manages a blend of sweetness and acidity, drawn from a source that will eventually disappear but is richly satisfying for the 128 minutes we get to spend under its spell.

Our next film: ***Black Mountain Poets***, Tuesday 21 March