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The searchers: A waitress (Mathilde Seigner) turns to her boyfriend (Luck Mervil) for help finding her missing son in *Alias Betty*.

'Alias Betty'

Crime of passion

A novelist (Sandrine Kiberlain) living in Paris finds her life grinding to a halt after tragically losing a son. Her mother (Nicole Garcia), a self-centered and clinically insane woman with a rocky history of parenting (she once tried to kill her daughter in a fit of psychosis), decides to kidnap a little boy and give it to her offspring to dull the pain. What's worse is that the child's mother, an abusive waitress (Mathilde Seigner) whose biggest aspiration is to whore for local gangsters, doesn't seem to care much when the media's cameras are gone. Her boyfriend François (Luck Mervil), the cops' prime suspect for the kidnapping, actually wants to find the boy but is more preoccupied with Alex (Edouard Baer, playing the most reluctant gigolo in screen history), a petty criminal who may be the kid's father and may be working his way back into the waitress's arms. While one could technically bill *Betty* as a thriller, veteran French director Claude Miller (*The Accompanist*) owes more to low-key nail-biters like Laurent Cautet's *Time Out* than to the Hitchcock-homage school of suspense. Fueled by ironies (real ones, not the self-referential in-jokes that often pass for it) and the discreet shards of the bourgeoisie's shattered psyches, this adaptation of mystery writer Ruth Rendell's novel *The Tree of Hands* builds a toxic head of steam off quiet desperation without ever breaking its smooth-as-glass surface. The genre origins of the material become apparent as the third act trips into crime-fiction conventions, but Miller's ability to perversely screw with sentiments (you actually hope the author gets away with her newly happy "son") keeps a recognizably human pulse beating behind its masks of pulp and placidity. (David Fear)