

Document Citation

Title	Are these our children?
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Are these our children?, Ruggles, Wesley, 1931

ARE THESE OUR CHILDREN? (RKO Radio 1931) Written and directed by Wesley Ruggles
Scenario: Howard Estabrook; Camera, Leo Tover; Music, Max Steiner; Cast: Eric Linden, Rochelle Hudson, Arline Judge, Ben Alexander, Beryl Mercer, Robert Quirk, William Orlamond, Harry Shaton, Ralf Harolde, Roberta Gale, Mary Tamm, Billy Butts, *Reginald Barlow*

It may sound like limited praise to refer to "Are These Our Children?" as Wesley Ruggles' best picture. Normally a rather stodgy and heavy-handed director, he shared with Frank Lloyd the distinction of having made a number of VERY profitable movies, whose basic values however were provided by script or cast, and any one of which could probably have been turned into a much better picture by another director. But "Are These Our Children?", which he wrote as well as directed, is clearly a project that excited him and that he felt was important: it is an intensely personal film in the same way that William K. Howard's not dissimilar "Backdoor to Heaven" was personal. Moreover, in purely grammatical terms - the use of the moving camera, careful compositions, well-lit close-ups and very stylized transitional montage scenes and effects - it is much more of a movie than most of Ruggles' other films. It is also quite possibly the first genuine adult film noir. Even though that phrase came into usage only in the 40's, and the "rules" of film noir retroactively and arbitrarily laid down, it does seem to "follow" all these rules even though preceding the genre by a decade. It is a moderately paced yet somehow always very honest film. Eric Linden's performance, especially in the closing scenes, is quite remarkably sensitive, and never before or since has he had such a chance - nor done so well with such a specifically difficult (and ticklish) scene as this final one, which has more than a casual relationship to the climax of "An American Tragedy". In the face of the film's many virtues, its flaws are minor ones. Already quite a long film, it suggests that it may have been longer, and edited severely before release. Linden's initial descent into crime is just too quick and inadequately motivated, and one or two transitions later seem a bit abrupt too. Beryl Mercer's in 1931, when audiences hadn't had to sit through a whole decade of it! On the whole, a major film of its day, and one that should be far better known than it is.

William K. Everson