

# CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## Movie review: 'Iraq in Fragments'

rating (out of four)



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By Michael Wilmington  
Tribune movie critic

"Iraq in Fragments" is one of the year's finest documentaries, a remarkable example of the conjunction of a burningly topical and newsworthy subject with a brilliant filmmaker. Director James Longley's intimate three-part look at the separate Sunni, Shiite and Kurd cultures in the modern chaos of Iraq, reveals the country in a way we don't get in our relatively sketchy evening news reports.

Shot in Iraq from 2003 to 2005, "Iraq in Fragments" comes as close as we probably can to seeing for ourselves what's really happening there and how the people live now. Longley clearly has a viewpoint critical of U.S. involvement, but he never forces it on us. He doesn't batter at us with talking heads, newsreel footage or pontificating experts. He lets his images and camera subjects speak and act for themselves.

The first part of the film follows an 11-year-old Sunni boy, Mohammed Haithem, through his hard daily routines in Baghdad, trying to go to school (he's flunked his grade several times) while also working as an auto mechanic and shop apprentice for a bullying and sarcastic employer. Eventually Mohammed, trying to support his family, is forced to choose between education and work.

The second and most exciting section is an up-close look in the city of Naseriyah at the Shiite political/religious movement run by Mehdi Army leader Moqtada al-Sadr--shot under conditions of obvious danger. (Both the Shiites and the U.S. authorities were suspicious of Longley.) At one point we see a raid on local alcohol sellers, a trade frowned on by the strict Islamic group,

and later, a battle with Spanish troops around Najaf. But mostly, we observe the workings of an active Iraqi sect, one of many warring over the country.

The third section, set in the rural farmland of northern Iraq, in the Kurdish area, is a deliberate respite from the emotional and physical extremes of the first two parts. Here, Longley shows us a quieter, more ancient rhythm of life and a less volatile--but no less unstable--drama, here involving fathers and sons. (In the foreground here is a story of friendship and family, but in the background, clearly apparent, is the Kurdish push for independence.)

The style of "Iraq in Fragments" is poetic cinema verite, without outside commentary, and it's shot and edited so beautifully that, for much of its length, it seems like a superior dramatic feature--in the vein of Gillo Pontecorvo's "The Battle of Algiers," or of the recent neo-realist films from Iran. Longley is also in the classic Robert Flaherty tradition, an ethnographic filmmaker working closely with his subjects and trying to enter their lives--and, like Flaherty, he's a real poet of images.

Here, filming under harsh conditions, with a tiny crew, he's managed to make a classic non-fiction picture. The title "Iraq in Fragments" refers to both the three-part story construction (Longley initially planned up to 10 stories and filmed 6), and also to the state of Iraq today, a country in turmoil, splitting along fault lines of religion and culture. But it offers the consolation of revealing at least some of our common humanity with all three communities. Fragmented or not, "Iraq" shows us a country of people to whom we can relate, and that's a crucial beginning.

[mwilmington@tribune.com](mailto:mwilmington@tribune.com)

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### **'Iraq in Fragments'**

Directed and photographed by James Longley; edited by Billy McMillin, Fiona Otway, Longley; produced by John Sinno, Longley. (In Kurdish, Arabic and English, with English subtitles.) A Typecast Pictures release, in association with HBO Documentary Films; opens Friday at Landmark's Century Centre Cinema. Running time: 1:34. **No MPAA rating (parents cautioned for scenes and discussions of violence).**