

Fragments of Iraqi men

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By Daniel Nelson

The title of the beautifully filmed *Iraq in Fragments* refers to the impressionistic nature of the documentary as much as to the looming state of the nation.

There is no scripted narration for the three sections, which focus on an 11-year-old mechanic, Moqtadar Sadr's Shiite movement, and, with a startling change of mood, two sets of sons and fathers in Kurdistan.

Nor are there facts and figures, or explanations or an overt director's viewpoint. There's little dramatic action of the sort that dominates reporting from Iraq, an absence that heightens the impact when Sadr's followers are seen descending on the market to rough up and detain alcohol sellers.

One of the most stunning images come from the plumes of thick black smoke pouring from the brick ovens in the Kurdistan settlement of Erbil (built by Iraqi Jews early last century. Many local farmers are descendants of Jews who had converted to Islam).

But it is not the set pieces that make the film memorable. It is the pathos and vulnerability of 11-year-old Mohammed, tearfully desperate for the approval of his domineering boss and surrogate father; the missed opportunities of the teenage shepherd and brickmaker whose hopes of becoming a doctor are going up in flames in the kiln. It is the cumulative impact of small insights, coaxed out by film-maker James Longley's patience: rather than rushing in and out of the country he spent over two years there, building confidence, before further residence became too dangerous.

Longley says his aim was "to introduce the viewer to the breadth and complexity of the country", to show "a country full of people who care nothing for our political arguments. They have their own lives, their

own problems, their own way of seeing the world." He succeeds. The documentary's nine awards are fully justified.

After 94 minutes, however, I confess to a visceral reaction against spending another moment exclusively in the company of moustachioed, cigarette-smoking men. Margaret Thatcher showed that women do not always represent gentleness, compromise and non-violence, but the presence of women would surely blunt the jagged edges of Iraq's fragments.

* *Iraq in Fragments* is at the ICA in London on 20-22 and 24-30 April

IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS is nominated for Best Documentary Oscar

James Longley's outstanding documentary feature *Iraq in Fragments* -currently screening at the ICA - has been nominated in the Best Documentary category at this year's Academy Awards. The film is one of five titles nominated for the Best Documentary award. Other nominated films in the category include: *Deliver Us From Evil*; *An Inconvenient Truth*; *Jesus Camp*; and, *My Country, My Country*.

Iraq in Fragments is a unique trilogy of intimate, passionately-felt portraits of the war-torn country: A fatherless 11-year-old is apprenticed to the domineering owner of a Baghdad garage; Sadr followers in two Shiite cities rally for regional elections while enforcing Islamic law at the point of a gun; a family of Kurdish farmers welcomes the US presence, which has allowed them a measure of freedom previously denied. American director James Longley spent over 2 years filming in Iraq and this stunningly photographed film presents the country through the eyes of those who live there - the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds. *Iraq in Fragments* has been described by previous Best Documentary recipient Michael Moore as "a stunningly beautiful film ... What this movie shows, you will never see on the evening news."

Winner of Best Director, Best Cinematography and Best Editing awards in the 2006 Sundance Film Festival documentary competition, *Iraq in Fragments* was also awarded the Grand Jury Prize at the 2006 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. Most recently the film has won the Distinguished Feature Documentary Award at the International Docu-

mentary Association (IDA) awards and was named as one the Top 5 Documentaries of the Year at the National Board of Review awards.