

About a boy

An orphan's plight
haunts this stunning
documentary about
ordinary lives in Iraq

Iraq in Fragments

★★★★★

Director: James Longley
With: Mohammed Haithem,
Souleiman Mahmoud
94 mins, no cert

James Longley's outstanding documentary-portrait of ordinary lives in post-invasion Iraq has a structure and procedure that imitate its underlying political point: Iraq is fragmented. Broadly speaking, there are three fragments, and this is a reality with which the political classes here and in the United States are becoming acquainted. In the centre: the Sunnis, from which group Saddam and his followers sprang. In the south: the Shias, depicted by Longley as the centre of a retributive new militancy. In the north: the Kurds, who welcomed the American and British military action as the antidote to their oppression – and still do so. Boldly, Longley's film gives the Kurds the final voice, and the overall effect is far from boilerplate anti-Americanism.

In a series of stunningly filmed sequences, Longley and his camera seek

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out the real lives outside the frame of conventional TV news, and he succeeds in creating both compelling journalism and superb images. In Baghdad, he finds a heartbreakingly lonely 11-year-old orphan, apprenticed to a tough garage owner who has taken him in. This man appears at first to be affectionate to the boy in his rough and ready way, and the child's hesitant voiceover pays a kind of cowed tribute to how kind he is; and yet soon the man is cuffing him and shouting at him, and in the course of the film, the boy's feelings become something altogether different. In Baghdad, in the cafes and streetcorners, the cynical talk is of how things were actually better under Saddam – although these sentiments may have been disproportionately amplified.

In the south, the Shias are electrified by the historic opportunity that has opened up for them, and vigorously prosecute their new Islamic revolution; we see them loudly declaiming the great Satan Uncle Sam and brutally arresting people on suspicion of selling alcohol, a suspicion that does not appear to have much relation to due process of law. These people appear drunk with righteousness, and again, the dark talk is of a

rampant new Saddam-ism. Then there is a gentle, pious Kurdish man who sadly reflects that his people's religious identity has left them out of step with the fierce new flame of anger burning elsewhere in the country.

It is a superbly made film, pessimistic but not simplistic. Longley's footage of Baghdad streetlife is outstanding: he seems to capture stunning images everywhere he looks, just by pointing the camera, a dozen scorching pictures every minute, rendered hyper-real on high-definition video. It looks like an imaginary landscape from some impossibly violent and traumatised futureworld, from which the director reports back with something other than the TV newsman's redundant rhetoric of sensation or forced compassion.

But in the end, my mind kept going back again and again to that small boy in Baghdad, who is at first trusting and accepting, and then coldly angry about what life has given him. With discretion and subtlety, Longley has created a narrative for the child without it seeming artificial or absurd. This alienated, orphaned figure becomes a metonym for Iraq, a tragically divided nation. **PB**

