

## IN OR OUT? ASYLUM SEEKERS MAKE FOR A POWERFUL 'P.O.V.'

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### **Body**

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**P.O.V.:** WELL-FOUNDED FEAR. Tonight at 9 o'clock on Ch. 13. 3 1/2 STARS.

The documentary series "**P.O.V.**" is starting its 13th summer season tonight. It predates all but two of the current prime-time newsmagazines on the commercial networks, and deserves to outlast most of them.

Like "Frontline," another PBS stalwart nonfiction series, it presumes audiences have the attention span, and intelligence, to watch a show devoted to a single topic. Tonight, "**P.O.V.**" begins its season with a very strong show: "Well-Founded Fear" (9 p.m., WNET/Ch. 13).

The two-hour film goes behind the scenes, and into the interviewing process, at the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, where decisions are made about whether people are awarded or denied political **asylum**. Unlike many "**P.O.V.**" outings, which approach their topics from a clearly defined and unapologetic bias, "Well-Founded Fear" gets to the core of its subject merely by switching the point of view.

Film makers Michael Camerini and Shari Robertson get their cameras into the cramped INS offices, and faithfully record the process whereby applicants, officers and interpreters review the information necessary to grant or refuse requests to stay in the United States.

That would be enough for most documentarians, perhaps, but the makers of "Well-Founded Fear" turn the tables on the process by turning to the other side of the table, and interviewing the INS interviewers.

The soul-searching from the agents ranges from bemused to poignant, with some admitting to the overwhelming absurdity of trying to ascertain truth from lies in such a short evaluative session, and others all but collapsing under the weight of every decision.

One of the INS agents cannot resist shooting glances at the camera during one interrogation session, so amused is he by what he considers the inconsistencies of the story he's hearing. Down the hall, another agent ends up rejecting another applicant for **asylum**, but confesses to feeling not very good at all about either his decision or its result.

Then he looks directly into the camera and says, wearily and suddenly, "Turn that damned thing off."

The narratives told by the people seeking **asylum**, often diluted through and by their interpreters, range from the improbable to the heart-wrenching. The stories of abuse relayed by a Chinese poet, Huang Xiang, are so horrific, and relayed so agonizingly ("I do not dare to remember my past," he says), that not even the most cynical of INS agents can doubt what they're hearing.

"I am humbled," says one. "What a life."

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And what a documentary. The closeups, when people learn of their fates, are unforgettable, as are some of the very candid admissions by the INS interviewers. And by all means, stay tuned until the very end, because the updates at the end will both amaze and amuse you. It's another fine start for "P.O.V.," and another example of nonfiction TV taking the time and using it well.

## Graphic

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OUTCAST Poet Huang Xiang's plight moved INS officials.

## Classification

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