

Friday Night Lights Study Guide

Friday Night Lights

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Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers specifically to the 2015 Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition of “Friday Night Lights,” which includes a new afterword by the author.

“Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream” is the account of the 1988 Permian High School Panthers football team in Odessa, Texas. First published in 1990, the book later became a movie and a television series. The author, journalist H.G Bissinger, explains that his fascination with America's love of sports inspired him to write “Friday Night Lights.” He states that one sport, high school football, even helps to hold small communities together. Researching various teams, Bissinger finds Permian High School in Odessa, where twenty-thousand people regularly attend games. In March, 1988, he quits his job, packs up his family, and moves to Odessa.

When Bissinger arrives in Odessa, he learns all he can about the importance of football in the town. Odessa has two high schools, Odessa High and Permian High. However, Permian has a great reputation for football, having won several state championships. At the moment, football is the only source of pride for the town. Odessa is a very conservative, middle-class town. It has enjoyed booms and suffered busts from its oil industry. Since the town is currently in the midst of an economic downturn, the people devote even more time on high school football, a sport that brings Odessa a measure of success. Like most Southern towns, Odessa has a long history of segregation. However, on the football field, the citizens are able to find common ground between whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Skin color ceases to matter. The 1988 team consists of black players James “Boobie” Miles (a running back) and Ivory Christian (one of the team captains). The white players include Jerrod McDougal (offensive tackle), Don Billingsley (troublemaker), and Mike Winchell (quarterback). Brian Chavez, a tight end, is Hispanic.

Bissinger explains that the citizens of Odessa spend time, money, and energy on football –especially Permian High football –like nothing else. For a brief season, the junior and senior varsity team members enjoy the shower of glory that rains down on them. It is unlike anything they will experience again in their lives. They date the prettiest girls, have a blind eye turned toward bad grades, goof off, and skip classes. They are local celebrities. Nevertheless, the players feel a tremendous amount of pressure, for they carry the weight of the town on their shoulders. They know how seriously their parents and the locals take football. At the same time, most players see football as a ticket out of town, hoping to be picked up by college scouts. Others want to live in the moment, knowing they are destined for the oil fields or local blue-collar jobs.

Head Coach Gary Gaines knows all these things, and he knows his own job is dependent on winning games. Gaines is determined to help the young men on his football team achieve their next state championship. The season gets off to a good start, but two losses tie the Panthers in first place with the Midland Lee Rebels and the Midland High Bulldogs. Both teams are the Panthers' biggest rivals the next town over. Most Permian fans and some players are furious with the three-way tie, blaming



everything on Coach Gaines. Gaines knows that the record of only two losses is not something of which to be ashamed. However, in a town where winning is everything, a loss is devastating and cause for anger. The three-way tie means that, according to district rules, a simple coin toss will be used to decide which teams go on to state playoffs. The Panthers and the Rebels advance. The Panthers progress well through the playoffs, beating the Rebels but succumbing to the Dallas Carter Cowboys. The Cowboys have some of the best players in the entire country. The loss is heartbreaking, especially to the senior players, whose moment in the spotlight is now over. During the following year under Gaines, the new Panther team takes the state championship.

Twenty-five years later, Bissinger returns to visit the people he wrote about in his book. After Permian experienced some bad years, the school hired Gaines once again to help get the football program back on track. He retired in 2012. Boobie, who suffered a tragic knee injury during the 1988 season, was never able to play football again. He now has children and works menial jobs. Ivory Christian is married and works as a trucker. Jerrod McDougal works for his family's construction business. He has never married. Mike Winchell works locally as a lease manager for an energy company. He has never married. Don Billingsley has turned his life around. No longer a troublemaker, he is a family man who works as a successful consultant. Brian Chavez, who graduated from Harvard, went on to become a lawyer. However, his legal license was suspended for getting into a fight with his fiancée's ex-husband. The town of Odessa is doing much better economically. Most importantly, as Brian explains, the town now has a healthy relationship with football.



,Preface - Chapter 3, Boobie III

Summary

Preface – Since H. G. Bissinger was a young teenager in the Philadelphia suburbs, he has been fascinated by the idea that football holds small towns together. As a newspaper editor in his thirties, he travels to Odessa, Texas in March, 1988. Odessa is located in West Texas. Bissinger has heard that as many as twenty-thousand fans attend the Friday night football games of Permian High School's Panthers. Oil fields along Highway 80 surround the rural working class town. The downtown is largely deserted; the eastern side is suburban, modern, but many of the houses are for sale; and the Southside is largely composed of minorities. Bissinger realizes that his trip to Odessa will be more than about just football, but issues of survival, American values, race, politics, the dreams of residents, and so on. He decides to leave his job at the Philadelphia Inquirer in July 1988 to move with his wife and two young sons to the place in order to experience it so that he can write about it. It is there he learns from a local father that athletics lasts for a short period of time, that it is a glorious season in a long life that people often forget comes after the season. Bissinger realizes that high school athletes see this season as the high point of their lives, and carry the weight of the town on their shoulders.

Prologue – Southside resident James “Boobie” Miles, running back for the Permian High Panthers, prepares for a game against the Midland Lee Rebels after a knee injury two months before. Boobie knows the game could make or break the Panthers’ chances for the playoffs, and that his own chances for college will rest heavily on how he plays that evening. At eighteen, Boobie worries he is already a has-been. Jerrod McDougal, offensive tackle, listens to Bon Jovi to pump himself for the game. He knows he has no natural talent though he plays well, and knows he is not bound for football at a major college so he must live up life on the Panthers while he can. Mike Winchell, the quarterback and one of three team captains, does his best to keep sharp and focused, knowing much responsibility for the outcome of the game will rest directly on him. Mike’s family is very poor, so his mother drives him to school since he does not have his own car. Mike looks forward to college and getting away from poverty.

Ivory Christian, a team captain, initially believes he will enlist in the Marines after high school. Brian Chavez, the third team captain and tight end, looks forward to the game for the roughness and violence of the sport. Yet, Chavez also excels academically, and wants to go to Harvard. As the game approaches, Ivory becomes so nervous he throws up. Gary Gaines, the Permian coach, encourages his players to put everything they have into playing. As they take the field, the crowd chants “MO-JO,” the Permian moniker taken after an old Wilson Pickett song. By halftime, the score is 21-16 with the Panthers up. Boobie, who has been kept sidelined, wants to quit the team in anger for being kept out of the game, but black junior Nate Hearne talks him down and convinces him to stay. The Panthers, however, go on to lose the game and risk their chances at a shot at the playoffs. Boobie quits the team. Gaines knows pressure is building against



him in the community, who expect a win. Several “For Sale” are planted in his yard as a reminder.

Pre-Season

Chapter 1, Odessa – The book skips back several months to August, when football practice begins. Coach Gaines and the other coaches arrive at the field house offices early, where they await the arrival of the fifty-five players. Gaines welcomes them, and reminds them how important they are to the school and the town. Bissinger steps back to explain that the town of Odessa itself was founded in the 1880s by a syndicate of Ohio land speculators who advertised that towns along the railroads would be California-like places of wealth and good living. Ten families originally purchased plots in Odessa, and by 1910, the population was 1,178. People scraped by, but by 1926, oil had been discovered which sent the town ever after through periods of boom and bust, population growth and contraction, and periods of violence.

The isolated town, Bissinger notes, had a very bad reputation. Likewise, Bissinger notes, Odessa was (and is) a mixture of Southern charm and the Wild West, friendly but independent, God-fearing but fierce when provoked, poor but generous, and staunchly behind Reagan and the Republicans by the 1980s. Only a few people in town ever found the place’s conservatism distasteful. By 1946, Odessa had won its first State Championship, forever linking the town to football. Several more championships followed. By 1988, Gaines and Odessa expect to achieve another –but Gaines reminds his players that public opinion of their playing does not matter like the people on the team.

Chapter 2, The Watermelon Feed – In late August, the Permian booster club has its evening Watermelon Feed, attended by hundreds upon hundreds of locals dressed in black and white, the school colors. In addition to watching a football season highlight film and eating watermelon, school athletic items ranging from jackets to flags to t-shirts to the 1988 football yearbook are sold. The locals think their support of the high school, especially football, is a community event, like church. There is little reason for community pride, so the entire town rallies around its football team, such as when H. Ross Perot condemned the attention towns like Odessa paid to extracurricular activities. The football team itself is thrilled to play each year, and to partake in the traditions associated with the game. For example, the Pepettes (senior girls who form the select school spirit squad), are assigned a football player for the season. The girl is required to make signs supporting the player and to give the player treats before each game. In addition, all of the Pepettes are expected to excite the school and community. At the Watermelon Feed, that year’s team is always introduced to great applause. Boobie there learns he will be tapped to fill the shoes of last year’s star, Shawn Crow.

Chapter 3, Boobie , I – Boobie participates in a preseason scrimmage against the Palo Duro Dons in late August, knowing that several colleges are closely watching him. He is determined to make it to State, get into college, and then make it to the pros. But during the scrimmage, his foot gets caught in artificial turf, after which another player falls on it. Welton Butler, the team doctor, examines Boobie immediately. Boobie ends up with a



terrible knee injury that will keep him out for six to eight weeks. Boobie is furious. Trapper, the trainer, secretly worries that it will ruin Boobie's season. Boobie's uncle, L.V., worries about this as well.

Chapter 3, Boobie , II – This section occurs in the past. L. V. grew up in Crane, Texas, where his minority neighborhood dubbed “Niggertown” had a massive wall erected around it so white people did not have to see it, and where everything he did kept him largely segregated from whites. Only Niggertown's colored basketball team, of which L.V. was a part, brought the community together when they took the Class B State Championship. Years later, L.V., upon learning of his nephew Boobie being placed in a foster home after his parents became especially violent, decided to take it upon himself to raise Boobie. Boobie, a troubled child, was straightened out by L.V., his wife, Ruby, and their three kids over time. By 1988, Boobie credited L.V. with helping to drive him to be a good kid and to get into football. When Boobie finally made the football team, because of a learning disability, he was encouraged and coddled in ways that other teammates were not. This caused some resentment among some teammates, as it is remembered, but it is noted that without football, Boobie would be nothing.

Chapter 3, Boobie , III – This section returns to the present in 1988. Boobie's teammates, including Ivory Christian and Clifrtton Monroe encourage Boobie to get well as soon as possible so he can go back to playing. Boobie worries, however, that the injury is a bad omen for the entire season. Boobie's mood worsens when he learns the knee will need arthroscopic surgery, and his road to recovery might be longer than previously anticipated.

Analysis

“Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream” is the account of the 1988 Odessa, Texas Permian High School Panthers football team by H. G. Bissinger, first published in 1990 and later made into both a movie and a television series. Journalist H.G Bissinger explains that “Friday Night Lights” came by way of his fascination not only with the grip that sports has on Americans, but in particular, the idea that high school football can be what holds small towns together. Researching various teams, Bissinger explains he found Permian High School in Odessa, where twenty-thousand people would regularly attend games –a staggering turnout for any level of sports. Bissinger immersed himself in Odessa, from which the themes of small town life and community can be discerned.

Small town life is viewed through Bissinger's descriptions of Odessa. Odessa has always been a very small town. It is now a town that is driven by oil production. As such, Odessa goes through periods of booms and busts. Currently, in 1988, the town is in a bust. Odessa itself has few things to be proud of, and its football team stands out as something to be proud of even in difficult times. Socially and culturally, Odessa is very conservative, very Republican, devoutly Christian, and solidly working and middle-class. Odessa is also struggling with the final vestiges of racism and segregation, which disappear completely on the football field. More about this will be stated in upcoming chapters.



The community aspect of small town living is noted again through the area's support of football. Apart from church and politics, football brings people in the community together like nothing else. Beginning with summer practice and the Watermelon Feed, the community bands together around its football team. Parents and fans not only patronize the Feed, but they purchase school merchandise, hold fundraisers, and attend games when the season begins. The girls on the Pepette squad are assigned football players to make signs, give sweets to, and support. The players themselves devote everything they can to playing the game and ensuring the community has a winning team around which to rally, support, and cheer on. As Bissinger notes early on, his desire to follow the Panthers for a season will not just be about the games, but about the community and the football consciousness of the community as well.

Indeed, football itself becomes a dominant and overarching theme to the book, for football is one of those things around which Odessa moves. Football is indeed the highlight of life for many of the players –something they will have once, briefly, and never again. A local father explain to Bissinger that it is a glorious season in a long life, with the rest of life being something that people often forget comes after the season. (The future itself will soon become an important theme.) Bissinger realizes quickly that many small town high school athletes see a sports season as the high point of their entire lives. He also recognizes that towns with so little take pride where they can, meaning that the players carry the weight of the town on their shoulders.

This weight is also often extended to players by their own families. Many players have fathers or other relatives who played football or other sports, and want their sons to follow in their footsteps. Among them is Boobie, whose uncle, L.V., played basketball many years before. The pressure on players like Boobie is especially high given not only the expectations of the small town community in which they play, but the expectations of their relatives as well. The reader should note that Boobie's injury is especially devastating to him for these reasons. In much the same way that the town is economically challenged, Boobie is intellectually challenged to find his talent. Playing football is his niche. Without football, it is noted, Boobie is nothing.

Early in Bissinger's book, the future seems clear. The Panthers are expected to win the state championships. Boobie's injury is expected to keep him sidelined for a while, imperiling his chances at college. Most of the other players, such as Brian Chavez and Mike Winchell, understand that football is a way for them to better their lives and rise above their small town circumstances. Others, like Jerrod McDougal, believe they will never be much in life in the future, so they had better enjoy their moment in the spotlight while they can. It is a future outlook that is at once both promising and bleak.

Vocabulary

Immersed, predominantly, superlative, extolling, pandemonium, excruciating, ambivalence, exhortations, ferocity, methodical, languished, euphoria, paradoxical, loquacious, machinations, innately, eligibility, exuberant, requisite, recalcitrant



The Season, Chapter 4, Dreaming of Heroes – The Season, Chapter 7, School Days

Summary

Chapter 4, Dreaming of Heroes, I – This section occurs in the past. When Mike Winchell was thirteen, his father died from hard drinking, hard smoking, and an old oil field accident that cost him his leg. Mike's older brother, Joe Bill, reminded Mike how much Mike meant to their father. It was their father who first got Mike into sports, beginning with Little League baseball. It was Joe Bill who helped encourage Mike to play football to be a part of the community, and to help take his mind off their father's death. Mike enjoys the support of his brother. Mike loves his quiet, reserved mother deeply. In 1988, when Mike became quarterback, he knew that he, as well as twenty-thousand fans, expected something amazing to happen.

This section now returns to the present in 1988. Mike is now seventeen, and often thinks of his father. This includes before the first game of the 1988 season against El Paso Austin. Assistant Coach Tam Hollingshead tells the young men to hustle, have fun, and win. The team takes the field and opens up over El Paso Austin. Among the touchdowns scored is by starting tailback Don Billingsley, who is cheered on in the stands by his father, Charlie, who also played football many years before.

Chapter 4, Dreaming of Heroes, II – Charlie was both a hell-raiser and a football hero back in the late 1960s, having struggled with college, various jobs, and alcoholism. Now in his late thirties, Charlie is in rehab and looking to repair his fractured relationship with his son as a result of divorce and alcoholism.

Chapter 4, Dreaming of Heroes, III – Don Billingsley's debut comes with a fumble, and a rough first half, but the coaches tell him to forget the past and focus on the future. Mike Winchell, meanwhile, has the best game of his life –seven for nine passing for 194 yards and four touchdowns. Chris Comer, brought up from JV due to Boobie's injury, plays the entire second half and amazes Assistant Coach Belew, who watches the game from the press box to relay offensive signals to Gains by way of a headset. The Panthers win against El Paso Austin by 49-0. After the game, the attention given to Comer by the coaches, and the amount of time with the ball Comer has on the field seems unfair to Don Billingsley, who believes that black players are favored over white players. Billingsley writes Comer off as "another nigger" being moved up to carry the ball.

Chapter 5, Black and White, I – The word "nigger" is in common use in Odessa, but varies in meaning from a descriptive term to a racially cruel term to a way to distinguish between normal, hardworking black people and those who refused to do anything



except live on welfare. Most people do not mind the use of the word, but some, such as Lanita Akins, an ex-hippie Democrat and Unitarian, do. She wants things to keep changing for the better. Most racially motivated laws and ways of doing things have gone by the wayside by 1988, but things like the use of the word “nigger” still remain. Other people, like Permian player Michael Cox’s father, Dwaine, believe desegregation has done nothing good for the town. Daniel Justis, a dentist, had been a football player nearly twenty years before. He contends that the breakdown in discipline on the football team has come as a result of desegregation in 1982.

Gene Collins, head of the local NAACP, explains blacks have no role models to admire and respect. The only black politician in the area, Willie Hammond, Jr., was arrested and convicted for arson and perjury relating to a failed attempt to build a new civic center. The man who helped desegregate schools, Reverend Laurence Hurd, ultimately fell back into a life of crime as in his younger days. Jim Moore, the white, last principal of the all-black Ector High School before it was closed down to promote integration says integration has not happened, but that people are only concerned with appearances and percentages to legally demonstrate segregation is gone.

Chapter 5, Black and White, II – This chapter occurs in the past. In the 1960s and 1970s, social upheaval and racial tension affected Odessa relatively little. As the newspaper explained at the time, it was the right of whites and blacks to want to attend all-white or all-black schools. Likewise, moves to integrate would have destroyed the football program, according to Lucius D. Bunton, a partner in the town’s biggest law firm and later a federal judge appointed by Democrat President Jimmy Carter.

Chapter 5, Black and White, III – This chapter occurs in the recent past. Not until the 1980s did desegregation finally come to Odessa by way of Laurence Hurd. Hurd, who had traveled throughout the country bringing about integration, recognized clear signs of segregation in Odessa. Hurd motivates and organizes Odessa’s Southside to take a stand against racism and segregation. Ironically, the community comes together to preserve 99-percent minority Ector High even though they support desegregation because Ector has become so important to their community. Despite this, the federal government moves to shut down Ector to enforce desegregation. When this occurred, school zone lines between Odessa High and Permian High were drawn so that Permian would receive the greater number of black athletes to benefit its football program.

Chapter 5, Black and White, IV – This chapter occurs in the recent past. The only place where integration began in Odessa is in sports, especially the football program, but even then, it is only marginal at first. Nate Hearne, the only black coach for Permian football, noted that blacks might fit as athletes but did not fit as part of regular society. Lanita Akins remembers how the football field was the one place where blacks were not referred to as niggers. Hurd, however, looked down on sports-based integration because it was short-lived and meant nothing in the long-term for blacks. He believed the cotton field had been replaced by the football field. Hurd’s beliefs, however, were looked down on by almost everyone, including blacks who believed he had let the black community down after being arrested for returning to a life of crime.



Chapter 5, The Ambivalence of Ivory, I – This chapter returns to the present in 1988. Ivory Christian has a love-hate relationship with football. He loves to play the games themselves but hates the amount of time practices, drills, and studying up on football the sport requires of him. Ivory has also had a difficult time adjusting and warming up to a school system which, only a few years before, had segregation. At the same time, Ivory Christian has become a devout Christian, having committed himself to Jesus Christ a few years before, and seeking to work in ministry. The only part of his former life that remains unchanged is his playing of football. Before each game, Ivory becomes so nervous and so worked up that he throws up. As the game with the Marshall Mavericks approaches, Ivory is told to study up on the Mavericks' star player, Odell Beckham.

Chapter 5, The Ambivalence of Ivory, II – The Marshall game is the second of the season, but it seems like the playoffs because Marshall is ranked third while Permian is ranked fourth, and because the game, away at Marshall, will be a test. If the Panthers can survive there, Coach Gaines says, the Panthers can survive anything. As the game gets underway, Ivory keeps Odell in check and even bests him. Scouts from other high schools sent out to study competition begin to take notice of Ivory. The Permian Panthers end up losing. Gaines blames himself. It is the team's first non-conference loss in nine years. Gaines promises the team they will do better the following week. Gaines knows the pressure will be on from the parents and the public who like him personally and think of him as a good man, but not necessarily a good coach. The players, however, brush the loss off and look forward to the next game.

Chapter 7, School Days, I – The Majorettes, dressed in short black-and-white dress costumes, lead a pep rally for the Panthers, attended by parents, families, friends, and residents from across the city. The Pepettes, who helped set up the pep rally, help take everything down afterwards. The pep rally helps set Don Billingsley's focus on football rather than on school. Most of the teachers in school do just enough to get the kids to learn and get by, and little else because most of the kids do not seem to care, and because academic performance is low. Everything is blamed from the current oil bust to desegregation to modern kids simply not being aware of responsibility. Among the students, the most popular are high school football players like Don, while kids like Eddie Driscoll, a brilliant senior stands out like a sore thumb. Eddie himself likes football, and is envious of the status football players enjoy.

Roqui Pearce, a Pepette who graduated the previous year, is dating the now-senior player Codi Dean. To her, and to the other girls, there is a mystique and glamor about dating a football player, and a Permian football player at that. Many of the girls themselves hope to be rich one day –by marrying someone rich. In the meantime, Pepettes and cheerleaders enjoy being at the top of the social ladder for girls. For the girls, being Homecoming Queen and being a Pepette or a cheerleader is the summation of their high school careers. Intelligence in girls is not seen positively by the boys or the girls at Permian. In fact, girls are so desperate to be accepted in with the football players that one girl offered to pay a player to sleep with her. To Don Billingsley, school is only about socializing.



Chapter 7, School Days, II – Brian Chavez defies the dumb jock stereotype, for Brian is ranked number one in his class academically. On the field, he is a fiery player; off the field, he is gentle and reserved. Brian's desire to go to Harvard secures the help of a teacher named LaRue Moore, who is determined to see Brian succeed. LaRue, while she does not begrudge football, wishes more time and money was spent on education rather than football. She also wishes things other than sports could be emphasized as well.

Chapter 7, School Days, III – Hugh Hayes, superintendent of schools in Ector County, has been on the job for two years. He intends to boost academic performance in Odessa, but knows he must be careful to respect the love of football in the town and the county. Former school board member Vickie Gomez laments that in Odessa, God, country, and Mojo football rule the day.

Chapter 7, School Days, IV – Boobie spends his day at school shuffling through class, paying little attention and doing little work. His mind remains focused on football, and because of his status as a football player, is allowed to leave class early to ensure he will be at practice on time.

Analysis

As Bissinger continues his account of the 1988 Permian football season, he weaves events of the present (1988) with events of the past. This occurs not only by way of more fully delving into the identity and nature of Odessa, but into the lives of the players Bissinger has chosen to profile as well. The reader will remember that small town communities, economically depressed, look to take pride in whatever areas they can. For Odessa, this is football. The reader will also remember how the players themselves place so much emphasis in football given their difficult circumstances. Yet, it is who these players are as individuals as well as collectively which makes understanding the scope and importance of football in their lives possible.

Brian Chavez defies the dumb jock stereotype, Bissinger explains. Chavez is not only a beast on the field, but he excels academically as well and wants to go to Harvard. Football will be a way to make this happen so that Brian can be more than the circumstances into which he was born. Mike Winchell has had to deal with the tragic death of his father, who instilled in his son a love of sports that Mike now plays in honor of his father. He wants to make his father proud. Don Billingsley and Jerrod McDougal believe they will never rise above their circumstances, so they had better enjoy their time in the spotlight while it lasts. Ivory Christian proves to be a very rare individual, as he hates football but plays on the team anyway. He knows it will help him get ahead in life. He dreams of becoming a Christian pastor and having his own church in California.

The importance that high school football has on Odessa can be seen in the way the players themselves are treated, especially at school. There, they are treated like gods. They are allowed to goof off and cut classes. They leave early for practice, and they get help with their grades.. For a girl, the highest social achievement is to date a football



player. The girls think that living in an economically depressed, small town will get them nowhere. They had better enjoy what they can while they can. The community is only too happy to indulge them.

As noted earlier, football is the one place where the small town of Odessa comes together as a community. Apart from its economic issues, Odessa has also struggled with race. While never violent or brutal as in other Southern towns, racial attitudes and segregation persist long after the Civil Rights movement. As Laurence Hurd, the man who helped to bring about integration in Odessa explains, minorities had few, if any minority heroes to look up to in the area. Hurd himself would prove to be a tragic case of irony, as the role model he provided came undone by his decision to return to a life of crime.

For the black players of the Panther team, in some cases, they are unwittingly not only providing role models for younger blacks to look up to, but are providing a bridge over racism when they take the field with their white and Hispanic brothers. On the field, skin color no longer matters. What matters is winning, and what matters is the town. Some in the town itself, however, have had some less-than-scrupulous motives in mind when breaking down racial barriers. Their interest in doing so has been primarily to benefit their sports teams, especially football. It was Permian High that received the best minority players.

Football is not all there is to life, however. Many parents quietly wish their children would focus more on the future rather than just football in the here and now. They understand that a confrontational attitude against football would be seen akin to heresy against God. Others, such as Superintendent Hugh Hayes and former school board member Vickie Gomez, also recognize there is more to life than football. However, they must approach the subject gently. Hayes, for example, does his best to promote the importance and integrity of academics without undermining football. To downplay the importance of football could turn the town against him, and it might cause irreparable harm to the town itself.

Vocabulary

Admonished, wizened, methodical, meticulous, irrevocably, panacea, antiquated, dilapidated, apocryphal, allure, provocative, poignant, trajectory, flagellate, enigmas, deciphering, articulate, pompous, exquisite, cadence, irrepressible, chagrined, lethargic, commensurate, cajoled



The Season, Chapter 8, East Versus West – The Season, Chapter 10, Boobie Who?

Summary

Chapter 8, East Versus West, I – As the fourth game of the season approaches – against Odessa High – Coach Gaines brings the team together for a talk. Losing to Odessa High is considered even worse than a Democrat becoming President. Through the story of a Confederate scout named Sam Davis who refused to betray a friend who also happened to be a Union scout, Gaines drives home the importance of loyalty and brotherhood, especially in a game against their crosstown rival. Gaines and the coaches then withdraw so the captains can speak to the team. Ivory explains to the team that the Odessa High players have to be hit fast and hard, and not allowed to get ahead. The game is hosted at Ratliff Stadium, where more than fifteen thousand people show up to watch. For the past twenty-three years, Odessa High has lost to Permian. They hope that finally they will win this year.

Chapter 8, East Versus West, II – Odessa High itself has had a long history with football, though its glory days are mostly behind it following Permian's opening in 1959, and later, largely Hispanic desegregation with boundaries being redrawn. Hispanic residents, many argue, do not care about football the way whites and blacks do. While the school does well in other sports, and well enough in academics, feelings of depression linger over the struggling football program. On the football field, Odessa High now seeks revenge against Permian.

Chapter 8, East Versus West, III – The game between Permian and Odessa High Bronchos begins. Not long after, Odessa High's team begins to fall apart, and the Odessa crowds begin to quiet. By the end of the game, Permian wins against Odessa, 35-7. Odessa High supporters also know that Permian would never agree to ideas of merging schools, because they would never do anything to compromise their football program.

Chapter 9, Friday Night Politics, I – As the game against Midland High Bulldogs approaches, fans begin camping out two nights before to purchase tickets. The Bulldogs are undefeated, and a fierce team about which Chavez especially worries. The Permian Panthers, however, play hard from the start. The Panthers win the game, 42-0. Forty years before, a young man named George H. W. Bush had watched games in that very stadium –and now in 1988, is running for President.

Chapter 9, Friday Night Politics, II – One week after the Midland game, Republican Vice President George H. W. Bush visits the Midland-Odessa area in his campaign for the presidency. Although the excitement for Bush's arrival does not reach the level of the



Midland game, it is still immense. Apart from their support of Bush's politics and beliefs, the locals are also especially thrilled because Bush is a local resident himself. Bush's speech focuses on positive aspects of America, and the future. Local residents, often used to bad news, are thrilled to hear good things for a change. Despite the oil bust under the Reagan-Bush years, locals are hopeful for the future and believe Bush will be the key to that future. Though Bush is wealthy, he fits in well among the locals and they love him for that as well. Bush's opponent, Democrat Michael Dukakis, is seen as elitist, too liberal, too stuffy, and too aloof. Additionally, Dukakis never took an interest in Friday night hometown high school football the way Reagan and Bush did –and this was telling as well in Odessa's support for Bush.

Chapter 10, Boobie Who? I – Boobie no longer stands out among his teammates, thanks to his recovery. In the world of high school football, Boobie might as well not exist anymore. On Permian, during practice, starters wear black shirts and subs wear white. Boobie is given a white shirt, which to him is shameful and makes him angry. Boobie demands of Coach Belew if he will be able to play Friday night. Belew responds that it will depend, even though Belew and the other coaches know it will be tough. Boobie, meanwhile, knows that only a return to the field will interest college scouts again. Boobie suits up for Friday night's game against the Abilene High Eagles, but is frustrated being kept on the bench. Finally, in the second quarter, he is allowed to play. Boobie plays well enough despite his injury, but it still isn't up to his usual performance. The coaches worry about Boobie's condition, but will not refuse Bobbie's desire to play. In the following week's game against Dallas Jesuit, Boobie plays very limitedly. In the following week's game against the Cooper Cougars, the same is true again. In both games, Boobie's injury slows him down and makes him an easy tackle.

Chapter 10, Boobie Who? II – Mike Winchell, who compared to other football players is thin and not large, still manages to surprise his skeptics by playing so well. Having grown up in difficult circumstances, everyone is amazed at how well Mike is able to handle the challenges life has given him. Much of this plays out in the field, where Mike often leads the team to victory, including against the Cooper Cougars. But the approaching game against Midland will be different, for although Midland is only just down the road, even the most liberal Odessans cannot stand Midland.

Analysis

As the football season gets underway, the town's obsession with football intensifies to a fever pitch as the Panthers take on their crosstown rivals, Odessa High. Amusingly, Permian and Odessa fans consider that losing to the other would be worse than a Democrat becoming president. The sense of community that develops among the players of the team is exemplified in the loyalty and support that grow among the teammates for one another, regardless as to whether they are white, black, or Hispanic. The sense of community and loyalty among the Panthers helps to overcome racial feelings and concerns. It is Gaines who pushes the players to develop and rely on such loyalty. The only colors that matter out on the field are team colors.



Odessa High, however, is plagued by racism in ways that Permian is not. Odessa High's football program has been lagging in the past several years. According to some, this is because the school has been so heavily flooded by Hispanics with the redrawing of school districts and the closing of Ector High. Interestingly enough, both Odessa High whites and blacks feel this way. Despite their struggling football program, it is something Odessa High parents and fans, from the poorer side of town, do their best to support and rally around, thriving on the occasional victory. The reader should note how lifeless the Odessa High crowd becomes when the Panthers take a dominating lead.

Interestingly enough, apart from the politics of football and the hold that football itself has over Odessa town-wide, national politics –and the effect that football can have on it –are exemplified through the Primary Season of 1988, and the Presidential Election the year after. Conservative Republican President Ronald Reagan's vice president, George H. W. Bush, is now seeking the presidency. Reagan is wildly popular among most residents in Odessa and nearby Midland. As a result, so too is Bush. While Odessa and Midland may be bitter rivals on the football field, in the political arena, they are staunch allies and are staunch supporters of conservative Republicans.

When Bush comes to Midland, he does not dwell on the struggles that locals face. The locals already know the struggles they face. Like Reagan, Bush points to a better future –and has no problem talking about local sports, including football. The reader should note that Bush, although a member of the wealthy class, has no difficulty at all connecting with locals because he sees them as human beings rather than voting blocs, and because he has earned the wealth he now has. His roots to the area, and his love of local football and local sports make him very much one of the locals. This is compared to Democrat Michael Dukakis, who, although also rich, is considered elitist and unwilling to see a place like Odessa or Midland as more than just a group of voters –and who never attended a local sporting event.

Beyond politics, football becomes increasingly important to the players as the season wears on –and begins to burn out quickly. Boobie's chances for a full recovery grow slim, and his determination to play although not fully recovered means he can't play as well as he used to. This frustrates him immensely, and makes him an easy tackle for his opponents. Boobie is humiliated at being sidelined so much, and knows that his chances for playing college ball are slipping away. The scouts are no longer interested as a result not only of his being sidelined, but of his injury as well. Although the coaches will not publicly admit it to Boobie, they know among themselves that Boobie is finished. This underscores the importance that football plays in the lives of high school kids not only for those living in the moment, but for those upon whose entire future football depends.

Vocabulary

Impassivity, affluent, haggard, equivocate, precipitous, virulent, ignominy, devoid, infectious



Push for the Playoffs

Summary

Chapter 11, Sisters, I – Odessa and Midland, though located close to one another along Interstate 20 and though both owe their life to oil, are starkly different. Midland is a desert city with tall buildings while Odessa is a sprawling town. Midland has a clean reputation while Odessa's is mixed at best. Midland is wealthy while Odessa is solidly middle and working class. While many other things are shared in common –such as Republican politics and devout Christianity –the distinctions between the towns keep them divided.

Chapter 11, Sisters, II – During good booms, wealth in Odessa flows freely. Thousands of dollars are spent on everything from redecorating mobile homes to welders with reading problems making more than \$80,000 a year. But Odessa's booms are nothing compared to Midland's.

Chapter 11, Sisters, III – Midland's oil booms are legendary, in which people not only purchase things like planes, but purchase several –and pilots to fly them. Men like Aaron Giebel build houses that cost millions, lose tens of millions of dollars in business ventures and investments, and are worth hundreds of millions of dollars themselves. Local banks, flush with money, make risky loans that later come back to haunt them.

Chapter 11, Sisters, IV – By 1988, the latest bust is still affecting both Odessa and Midland. Even the oilmen are still reeling. They, like the middle and working classes, hold out hope for the future. Midland, like Odessa, has come to prize its high school football teams in immense ways. It is another reason why the game between Permian Panthers and the Midland Lee Rebels will be so important. The night before the game, Gaines encourages his team to go out and win, using the example of courage afforded by Olympic swimmer Steve Genter who, after surgery and stitches to repair a collapsed lung, still swam in the Olympics, his stitches ripping open in the process.

Chapter 12, Civil War, I – The loss to the Midland Lee Rebels that follows is difficult for Coach Gaines. His wife, Sharon, comes to see him in the field office after the game, bearing medication for an ear ache. Sharon finds it difficult to listen to fans rip apart her husband and his reputation after losses, and after the season has not gone as well as they believe it should have so far. Even their daughter, Nicole, must deal with other kids making fun of her father. Gaines always worries about the effect such negative things has on his family. With the 22-21 loss to the Midland Lee Rebels, there is a three-way tie for first place. A pumpkin is smashed on Gaines's car, in addition to the For Sale signs planted in his yard. Gaines isn't bothered by this like he is bothered by the fact that For Sale signs have been placed in Brian Chavez's lawn. This is sickening to Coach Gaines. He begins to prepare for the coming, final game against the San Angelo Central Bobcats by picking up films of the team, and putting his faith in God.



A handful of fans, like Bobby Boyles, remain loyal to Gaines, noting that two losses are nothing to fire a man over. However, even some players, like starting center Clint Duncan, blame the loss against the Rebels on Gaines. A petition is begun to have Gaines fired. People clamor for the return of John Wilkins, nicknamed “A.G.” for “Almost God” after a thirteen-year run as coach with 148 games won, only 16 lost, and two State Championships. Wilkins is not regarded as a kind man, but a man who is relentless in his drive to win. Fans didn’t mind being scared by Wilkins, but only cared about his winning –and now want this back.

Chapter 12, Civil War, II – Jerrod McDougal believes that Odessa has only ever had two things –oil and football. Now, with oil gone, only football remains. Playing for Permian has been a dream of Jerrod’s since he was a kid. Losing to the Rebels has been the biggest disappointment in his life so far. Jerrod’s mother, like so many others, blames Coach Gaines.

Chapter 13, Heads or Tails I – The Permian Panthers, the Midland Lee Rebels, and the Midland High Bulldogs are all tied for first. Only two of these teams can go to the playoffs. Which two will be decided by a coin toss conducted by the teams’ three coaches, according to district rules. The coins are flipped. Both the Panthers and the Rebels end up with heads, while the Bulldogs end up with tails. The Panthers and the Rebels are then slated for the playoffs.

Chapter 13, Heads or Tails II – Boobie Miles could care less about the results of the coin toss, having quit the team earlier in the week, and having decided to pursue surgery on his knee. Boobie has now come to hate football. Others are unwilling to feel bad for Boobie, or to support him now that he has quit. Boobie, mad at the world, even argues with his uncle, and moves out. This hurts L.V. deeply, but L.V. knows he has little say in what has happened.

Analysis

In this section of the book, Bissinger underscores the football rivalry that has developed between Odessa and Midland –in particular, the Permian Panthers and the Midland Lee Rebels. While they may share conservatism, Christianity, and oil in common, on the football field, they are bitter enemies –a rivalry which has grown as a result of the starkly different compositions of their towns. Midland, mostly middle and upper-class, looks down on their Odessan neighbors, mostly blue-collar and middle class. The Odessans in turn look down on their Midland neighbors for their extravagance. As chronicled in the prologue of Bissinger’s book, the Rebels win their regular season game against the Panthers.

This loss is crushing for a team and a town that has honed itself on winning, and especially on not losing to its more ardent rivals. But it is Coach Gaines who perhaps bears the greatest weight now for the loss. He is looked to as the head of the Panthers, and the reason for its wins and losses. That the Panthers should now find themselves in a three-way tie as a result of their loss is unconscionable and unacceptable to many in



town. Petitions are written and signed calling for Gaines's firing, "For Sale" signs are planted in his front yard, and even some of Gaines's own players blame the loss on Gaines. Only a few people publicly defend Gaines in any way.

The pressure against Gaines can be felt by his wife and daughter as well, who share in their patriarch's successes and defeats. But to Gaines, the most sickening thing is that some in the town begin to target the players themselves, such as Brian Chavez, with "For Sale" signs as well. This further demonstrates just how important football is to Odessan life, and in particular, how crucial winning at football is to Odessan life. As noted earlier about Boobie, without football, Boobie would be nothing. Without football, Odessa would be nothing. The visceral reaction to the loss is demonstrative of just how frail the town's pride actually is.

What is interesting to note –and what Bissinger takes great care to explain –is that the fate of the Panthers, as well as the Rebels and the Bulldogs, after months of practices, training, games, victories, defeats, exhilaration, and heartache, all comes down to a simple coin toss. The Panthers and the Rebels make it through to the playoffs, which brings pressure and expectations like never before. No matter what future the players on the Panthers may have for themselves, the playoffs will greatly affect it. For those who plan to remain local, the glory of victory or the tragedy of defeat will follow them for the rest of their lives. For those who plan to leave and go on to college, a win or a loss will greatly affect how scouts and colleges look at them. For Boobie Miles, however, who has quit the team, he could care less about coin tosses and playoffs. His future already seems certain.

Vocabulary

Grandeur, alleged, materialism, tantamount, frenzied, coquettish, blatantly, vitriolic, undulating, ingenuous, reverential, beatified



Post-Season – Afterword

Summary

Chapter 14, Friday Night Addiction, I – The Panthers' first playoff game against Amarillo Tascosa is an easy victory, but the game against the Address Eagles is not so easy. Gaines comes down hard on the players, urging them to do better and calling them out when they do poorly. Still, the Panthers take the game, 41-13. Over Thanksgiving, an anonymous letter who the players believe is written by one of the coaches, appears in their lockers. The letter calls them out for not doing anything to outdo past champions. The next game against the Irving Nimitz Vikings arrives. Thousands of fans turn out. Gaines leads the Panthers in prayer before the kickoff. The Panthers win the game, 48-7.

Chapter 14, Friday Night Addiction, II – Jerry Hix, a football star from eight years before, watches footage of his playing with H.G. Bissell. Hix laments no longer playing football, and says he would give anything to go back out and play. Hix, now married with a daughter and two stepdaughters, runs his own company called Brazos Door & Hardware. He loves his life, he explains, but football is something he misses deeply. Hix still goes to the games to live vicariously through the new teams. Joe Bob Bizzell, another hero, went on to play college ball, did well, and became too full of himself. Joe explains to Bissinger that he got into alcohol and marijuana, and was kicked off the team for this. Joe explains his choices ruined his life, and that he now works as a pumper for the Amoco oil field west of Odessa. Daniel Justis, a major star in high school, now works as a dentist and works hard to ensure his son doesn't think high school football is all there is to life. Justis explains he hated football, and that he only played because he believed it was the only way to be somebody in Odessa. Assistant Coach Trapper says football is the "Friday night addiction" because there is nothing else like it, even for those who hate it.

Chapter 14, Friday Night Addiction, III – By the halftime game against the Lamar Vikings, the Panthers are only barely in the lead, 7-0. Ivory Christian, exhausted, is given a replenishing IV of lactose at halftime. He looks forward to the future, of gaining a doctorate in theology and having his own church in California. In the second half, Ivory plays incredibly well, with the Panthers ultimately winning 21-7. The Panthers now brace for their next opponent, the Dallas Carter Cowboys, who have some of the best players in the entire country.

Chapter 15, The Algebraic Equation, I – The heavily-black Carter Cowboys, including their star player, African-American Gary Edwards, enjoy the same fame and prestige as football players do at Permian. Edwards thinks of life at Carter as a football player as paradise, in which he and his fellow football players are allowed to leave class and go wherever they want in school, and in which they are not required to take tests to ensure they have passing grades to be able to play football. It is Gary's grade in Algebra II that creates a controversy before the playoffs.



Chapter 15, The Algebraic Equation, II – Only one teacher at Carter High refuses to fall in line for the football kids, Will Bates. Bates refuses to give grades to kids other than what they have earned, including Gary Edwards. Edwards's grades drop dangerously low, leading the principal to transfer Edwards out of Bates's class to save him. An anonymous call to state investigators tells them to examine the new grades Bates has received, which turn out to be less than the supposed 72 the school claims he now has. Marvin Edwards, Dallas superintendent, bans Gary from the playoffs. The Cowboys and their supporters rally against the superintendent. In reexamining Bates's grade book, the principal is able to change Gary's grade by giving him a 50% participation grade for a day that Gary received an "NC" or "No Credit." Facing public pressure and accepting the principal's judgment, Superintendent Edwards clears Gary to be in the playoffs. Local districts, like Plano, find this unfair and file injunctions, believing Carter students should be held to the same standards as their own. The situation at this point has caught the attention of State Secretary of Education, Commissioner William Kirby.

Chapter 15, The Algebraic Equation, III – Kirby is present in the court room of people that have assembled over Gary Edwards and his grades. Kirby addresses the courtroom full of people, saying that while football is important, so too are academics. District Court Judge Paul Davis grants a motion to delay the next playoff game until all the issues in the case could be properly considered. Bates is suspended without pay from the school, while Gary Edwards becomes an unwitting media star not for his football skill, but for his academics and privilege. Race surges to the heart of the matter. The heavily-black Carter High and their parents believe they are being targeted unfairly by whites, while the whites in surrounding school districts believe the Carter Cowboys are cheaters who have been given a pass while no other students have. Meanwhile, final details are worked out for the semifinal game between the Panthers and the Cowboys, to occur at Austin at Memorial Stadium of the University of Texas with a refereeing crew from San Antonio with at least two black members. The Panthers consent to giving up their home uniforms, and wearing white for the game.

Chapter 15, The Algebraic Equation, IV – Will Bates is called to the hearing based on his flunking of Gary Edwards and brutally questioned like a criminal. Davis finally rules that Gary Edwards may stay in the playoffs. Will Bates is fired from Carter High, reassigned to teach industrial arts at a middle school, is given an unsatisfactory evaluation rating, placed on probation for a year, has his salary frozen, and is forbidden from teaching math again. The Cowboys and their supporters are gleeful. Gary and his teammates come to believe that they are invincible no matter what is thrown against them.

Chapter 16, Field of Dreams, I – Mike Winchell is thrilled to be in the playoffs against the Carter Cowboys. Gaines approves highly of Winchell, believing him to be a one-in-a-thousand kid. The morning of the game is cold and rainy. Mike Winchell worries how well he will play with a wet ball.

Chapter 16, Field of Dreams, II – The Panthers prepare for their game. While gearing up, the whites listening to Bon Jovi and the blacks listen to Public Enemy. . Ivory throws



up like normal. Thousands of fans file into the stadium for both sides. Gaines urges the Panthers to come out swinging with the attitude that they will not lose the game.

Chapter 16, Field of Dreams, III – Derric Evans of the Cowboys mans up with Mike Winchell, using vicious and disgusting language to attempt to unnerve Mike. Mike struggles with the wet conditions and his nerves, but plays on through. By halftime, the Cowboys are up, 7-6. In the locker room, Jerrod pumps his fellow Panthers up, telling them they are going to need to do better than they have ever done in their lives before. The Panthers return to the field to continue play with the Cowboys. With twenty-two seconds left in the game, Permian has a first down at the Carter ten. Following a trick play, Permian now has a fourth and six at the Carter 24 with ten seconds left. Winchell throws to fellow player Duncan, who is open, but the effort falls short and the Cowboys win the game. The Panthers, their coaches, and the fans are all devastated. The Cowboys and their fans cruelly shout “No mo’ Mo Jo” over and over again. Mike and Brian, especially, are devastated. Coach Gaines gathers his team together to congratulate them on their hard work, and to let them know he is proud of them. The team then prays together. For the seniors, the loss is especially wounding because it is the last chance they will ever have.

Epilogue – The Cowboy Carters will the State Championship a week later. Gary Edwards and Derric Evans receive hundreds of college offers. Derric ultimately settles on Tennessee, while Gary Edwards goes to Houston. Believing they are invincible and looking for fun, Gary and Derric team up to commit armed robberies. Eventually, they are arrested. Gary receives sixteen years in prison; Derric receives twenty. Brian Chavez of the Panthers is accepted at Harvard. Though he plays football while there, he longer feels the same special love for the game as he did in Permian. Jerrod McDougal tries to get on in life without football, but struggles severely with the fact the football will continue on without him. He goes to work for his father’s company and continues going to spectate at Permian games. Don Billingsley moves in with his mother and stepfather in Oklahoma after the season ends, worried that he might become an alcoholic like his father. Don goes on to play ball for East Central University in Oklahoma, but sustains a knee injury in his first season. His knee is never the same again.

Mike Winchell, despite his amazing football career in high school, is not offered a single scholarship. Gaines fights to help Mike get into college, but nothing comes of it. He goes to Baylor and joins the football team as a walk-on. His skills there do not match his skills at Permian. Ivory Christian is given a full football scholarship to Texas Christian University. There, Ivory decides to become a police officer rather than a pastor, and so majors in criminal justice. Boobie Miles moves back with his uncle by Christmas. Boobie accepts a scholarship to Ranger Junior College in Texas, but Boobie is clearly no longer the same player as he was before. Odessa’s economic situation slowly picks up. The following year, 1989, the Panthers seize the State Championship.

Afterword: Twenty-five Years Later – It is 2015. H.G. Bissinger, now sixty, returns to Odessa to update the book to include recent events in the lives of those featured in the original edition. Bissinger explains he had to cancel his 1990 book tour in Odessa due to the anger with which the book was received there because he had exposed the good



and the bad of the place. Soon after, most Odessans forgave him, Bissinger recounts. Odessa is now booming economically. Bissinger first meets with Mike, whom he has not seen in over a decade since the first showings of the film version of the book. Mike is heavier but still looks pretty young. He now lives in the small town of Decatur where he works as a lease manager for Devon Energy. Mike reveals the book “Friday Night Lights” impressed Austin College in Sherman Texas, which gave him a full scholarship. Mike explains he turned it down for Tarleton State University instead.

Bissinger then drives to Beaumont to meet with Boobie Miles, who is in prison for violating the parole of his ten-year probation for aggravated assault. He will be eligible for parole again in 2017. Boobie, who has only ever held menial jobs, explains that prison has finally set him straight. Boobie has twins, James and Jasmine, who he lost in a custody dispute. Boobie explains he has encouraged his son’s love of football –and having something else to fall back on. Since 1991, Permian football has not won a State Championship. Gary Gaines becomes coach of the team again between 2009 and 2012 to resurrect the team’s fortunes, but is unable to do so. Brian Chavez, who still attends games, keeps in touch with Bissinger regularly, and reports that Permian fan attendance is down dramatically. While fans still love football, their behavior and support are not the same. There is now a healthy respect for the game, and there is a proper balance between football and other parts of life.

Brian has a law office in Odessa, but he has had his license suspended after he and two friends became embroiled in a domestic dispute with his now-fiancee and her ex-husband. Brian now also owns a company called FNL Energy, which delivers sand and water to the oil fields. Jerrod McDougal still works for his family’s construction business, which is doing well. Jerrod, like Mike, has never married. Jerrod’s life has been full of tragedy, including the early death of his brother Jaxon and being involved in a vehicular accident that killed one and wounded another off-duty police officer, both of whom had responded to the call. Jerrod hangs out with Brian once in a while, and likes himself much better now than he did in high school. Jerrod explains that his time in Permian football will never be equaled in his life.

Bissinger then seeks out Ivory Christian. Ivory explains his college football career did not pan out due to a knee injury, and that he quit school and went to Odessa College instead. He is now a trucker. Ivory is now married to a girl he has known since he was fifteen, and has a daughter named Ivy with her. Before Bissinger leaves, Ivory shows him a large framed collage that includes his old varsity letter jacket and the front cover of the hardcover edition of “Friday Night Lights.” Don Billingsley meets with Bissinger next. Billingsley explains he enrolled at East Central University, cleaned up his act and let go of his teenage partying ways. He is married and works as a healthcare consultant for a California-based company, Protivity. He dresses well and is clean-cut. Don’s daughter, eleven year-old Landry, does gymnastics and is ranked second in the state. As Bissinger leaves, he believes it will be his last time driving through Texas for an anniversary edition of the book.



Analysis

While the Panthers do exceptionally well in the playoffs, the Dallas Carter Cowboys present a hurdle that they cannot surpass. The Cowboys have some of the best-ranked players not only in the state, but in the country. While the Panthers bring the fury, hopes, and anxieties of a small town to the field, the Cowboys brings the fury, hopes, and anxieties of a minority community to bear on the field. The Cowboys themselves have a very similar football experience to the Panthers in many ways. Their minority community has little to be proud of, so they latch onto the few things at which they excel –such as football.

Like the Panthers, the Cowboys are held up as heroes in their community. If readers thought that the lengths to which Odessa's locals went to treat their football players well were extreme, the length to which the Cowboys' community goes to support them is greater. Star player Gary Edwards becomes the subject of a controversy that gains state and national attention as his academic grades are manipulated in order to allow him to play in the playoffs –a situation which not only sees court, but which essentially results in the near-destruction of the teacher who insisted upon honest, earned grades. To any reader, this is clear and troubling miscarriage of justice.

Edwards's ability to play in the playoffs leads to a firestorm of controversy along athletic and academic, and racial lines. Those who believe that academics should be taken as seriously as athletics have suffered a staggering defeat. Blacks believe that Edwards was unfairly targeted for his grades because he is black, while whites believe that Edwards essentially cheated and was allowed to play only because he is black. It is a terrible situation which demonstrates to Edwards, and others like him, that they can get away with anything. The same is true for Panther players like Jerrod, who reveled in being able to get away with so much in high school. The negative aspect of such privileging of football, as others note, is that it lets kids live in glory that last only a few minutes, but with the expectation that their success in that moment will last through life, making them feel invincible.

The Panthers ultimately lose to the Cowboys, and the future –once so far off –becomes now. Within a year of winning state, Edwards, some of his teammates, and other locals are in jail for a robbery ring. Their feelings of invincibility, coupled with their desire to commit crimes just because they could, lead to their downfall. A community which had risked everything to stand behind them has been let down because of them. The Panthers, under Gaines, go on to win the 1989 state championships the following year. By then, many of the previous year's players have fallen short of their dreams, or are on their way to new and different dreams.

Boobie is never able to play football again. He now has children and works menial jobs. Ivory Christian is now married and works as a trucker, having fallen far short of his dreams which not only including pastoring, but getting into the police force. Jerrod McDougal now works for his family's construction business, and has never married. As he believed, he never went on to do anything else outside of the local area. Mike



Winchell now works locally as a lease manager for an energy company, and has never married.

Don Billingsley, interestingly, has turned his life around, and is now a successful consultant with a good wife and daughter who has inherited her father's love of athletics. Brian Chavez, who graduated from Harvard, went on to become a lawyer but has since had his legal license suspended for getting into a fight with his fiancée's ex-husband. Odessa itself is now doing much better economically, and as Brian explains, now has a healthy relationship with football. After Permian experienced some bad years, Gaines was rehired to help get the football program back in order, retiring in 2012.

What is interesting to note, however, is that all of the players –including Ivory, who hated and was made nervous by football so much that he got sick before every game –have all come to miss their years on the field, just as predicted. They all say they would love to be back out on the field and playing again, but know they can never return to the time when they were sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen years old. Many of the players still get together to watch the games of the current team, living now vicariously through the new players as others lived through them years before.

As former high school player Jerry Hix notes a little earlier in the book, he would give anything to “be back out there.” The book “Friday Night Lights,” and the ensuing film and television adaptations, helped many of the players to relive that time in their lives. Reliving the past always brings back good and bad memories, and good and bad feelings –good in the wonderful times had, but bad in that those things will never be experienced again. Bissinger himself does his best to avoid ever going into the past, because one cannot live on memories.

Vocabulary

Visceral, indescribable, ambivalence, nondescript, homage, anathema, fortuitous, abundantly, heinous, abhorrent, salient, travesty, sanctity, messianic, contemptuously, innately, exquisite, vaunted, militaristic, reverberated, morose, dejected, ruminated, colossal, corpulent, introspection, reticent

Important People

H. G. Bissinger

H. G. Bissinger is the author and narrator of “Friday Night Lights.” Bissinger, a journalist with a wife and children, finds the hold that sports have on America to be fascinating. He is especially astonished by football's power to hold a small community together. His fascination leads him to quit his job and move with his family to Odessa, Texas, where he has heard the football games turn out massive audiences. Bissinger spends 1988 following the lives and fortunes of the Permian Panthers and observing the town of Odessa itself. The result is the book “Friday Night Lights,” which is published in 1990. The book shows the good and the bad. Bissinger is not welcome in town for some years after the book is published, but the citizens of Odessa eventually forgive him for his brutal honesty. More than a decade later, Bissinger revisits the area when a movie and a television show are made from the book. Twenty-five years later (in 2015), Bissinger, now sixty, travels to Odessa to catch up with the former players and to see how their lives have unfolded.

Gary Gaines

Gary Gaines is the coach of Permian High Panthers football. Gaines is a kind but stern man who expects nothing less than the best of his players. Having been a successful coach elsewhere, Gaines looks to bring the Panthers to the state championships in 1988. Supporting him are his wife and daughter, though the season does not go as well as expected. Gaines urges the Panthers to win, stresses loyalty, but also stresses that the game must be enjoyed. Gaines faces tremendous pressure as he suffers two losses, but he is kept on for another season where in 1989, he takes the Panthers to win the state championships. He goes on to coach elsewhere. Then, in 2009 he is asked to come back to Permian to get the football program back in order. He has fair success, and retires in 2012.

Boobie Miles

James “Boobie” Miles is a black senior at Permian High, a running back on the Panthers, and a foster child being raised by his uncle, L.V. Boobie has a learning disability, so it is only in football where he excels. It is noted that without football, Boobie would be nothing. Boobie experiences an injury early on, forcing him to be sidelined through most of the season. His college prospects diminish severely, and Boobie ultimately quits the team and moves out of his uncle's house. He goes on years later to have children, and drift from one menial job to the next.



Mike Winchell

Mike Winchell is a white senior at Permian High, and is the quarterback and one of the team captains for the Panthers. Very poor, Mike seeks to attend college to better his life, get away from Odessa, and do something successful. Mike is thin but tough, and helps lead his team to numerous victories. He goes on to play football in college, but his play there does not match his play in high school. He never marries, and ultimately goes on to work for an energy company.

Brian Chavez

Brian Chavez is a Hispanic senior at Permian High, and is one of the team captains. Brian is a thoughtful and intelligent young man who defies the dumb jock stereotype. He excels academically and aspires to go to Harvard, both to play football and for the education. Brian does exceptionally well during the 1988 Permian football season. He is accepted into Harvard. In Harvard, however, Brian cannot recreate the same football experience he had in Odessa. He later returns home, becomes a lawyer, and has his license suspended following a fight with his fiancé's ex-husband. He now owns a local energy supply company that provides sand and water to the oil fields.

Jerrod McDougal

Jerrod McDougal is a white senior at Permian High, and is an offensive tackle for the Panthers. Jerrod is a huge fan of Bon Jovi, and believes his will live his life in Odessa. Jerrod has an excellent season, but is disappointed when the Panthers do not go to State. Jerrod ultimately never marries, and goes to work for his family's construction company.

Don Billingsley

Don Billingsley is a white senior at Permian High, and starting tailback for the Panthers. Don is a party kid who believes his life will never amount to much, so he wants to live in the moment while he can. Don plays very well through the course of the 1988 season, and unexpectedly, turns his life around as he gets older. Don now works as a healthcare consultant for California-based company Protivity. He dresses well and is clean-cut. He marries a wonderful girl and has a daughter named Landry. Landry, taking after her father's love of sports, does gymnastics and is ranked second in the state in her age group.

Ivory Christian

Ivory Christian is a black senior at Permian High, and is one of the team captains on the Panthers. Ivory, unlike most, hates football, and only plays it as a way to get ahead in



life. He becomes so nervous before each game that he always throws up. Ivory dreams of life beyond Odessa, and alternately dreams of being a Marine, a pastor, and a police officer. None of these dreams ultimately pans out, as Ivory comes to raise a family and work as a trucker.

Gary Edwards

Gary Edwards is a black senior at Dallas's Carter High School, where he is the star player of the Carter Cowboys. Gary, like his Odessa peers, takes advantage of his status as a football player, and the slack from everyone else that it earns him to do what he wants, when he wants. He comes to feel that he is invincible when his failing grades are manipulated and presented in a court case that determines his ability to play in the playoffs. Within a year of leading his team to win the state championship, Gary (just because he can and because he feels invincible) is arrested and found guilty of being a part of a robbery ring.

Will Bates

Will Bates is a white teacher at the nearly all-minority Carter High School in Dallas. Bates is a strict but respected teacher who does not just hand out grades, but makes his students earn them. When Bates refuses to cut Gary Edwards any slack, he himself involved in a controversy that leads to court in which Gary's grades are manipulated so he can play. Bates is severely and unfairly punished for his role in things. Will Bates is fired from Carter High, reassigned to teach industrial arts at a middle school, is given an unsatisfactory evaluation rating, placed on probation for a year, has his salary frozen, and is forbidden from teaching math again.



Objects/Places

State Championships

State championships are state-level games between the two best football teams in the state of Texas. State championships are sought each year by every football team across the state, including the Panthers. The Panthers make the playoffs in 1988, but they fall short of winning the title. This proves devastating to the team and to the town of Odessa, even though the Panthers have won several state championships before 1988.

Black Jerseys

Black jerseys are the home game uniform worn by the Permian Panthers. Black jerseys are symbols of status that denote individuals as athletes, especially football players. During practice, the jerseys signify which players are starters. The uniform is an elitist status symbol. When Boobie is sidelined with his injury, he must practice in a white jersey, which humiliates and angers him. It is a physical manifestation of how far he has fallen and how little he is now needed.

White jerseys

White jerseys are the away game color uniform worn by the Permian Panthers. In games, white jerseys are seen as status symbols, as are black jerseys. In practices, white and black jerseys distinguish starting players from subs and sidelined players (who wear white). Boobie is humiliated and angered when he is forced to wear a white jersey during practice, evidence of how little needed he is needed anymore.

Watermelons

Watermelons are a favorite fruit and treat in Odessa. They become the reason for the Watermelon Feeds prior to football season each year in August. The feeds are not only an excuse for locals to get together to eat watermelon and socialize, but to raise money for the Permian High Panthers. The Feeds feature not only watermelons, but school and team merchandise for sale.

Grades

School grades are a reflection of a student's academic efforts in class. High school athletes are required to maintain passing grades in all subjects in order to play sports. Gary Edward's grades at Carter High demonstrate just how far some are willing to go to ensure that their football players have passing grades. Edward's grades are manipulated for a court case to ensure he can play in the playoff games in 1988. This



leads to a controversy at the national level, and a serious debate over academics and athletics, and leads to the persecution of teacher Will Bates for daring to insist that Edwards actually earn his grades.

Odessa

Odessa is a small town in Ector County, Texas, that is obsessed with football, and serves as the main setting for the book. Odessa is a very conservative, very Republican working and middle-class town built on oil, enjoying booms and suffering busts. Currently in a bust, they devote even more time and focus than ever on football, something which they know they are good at. Odessa has two high schools –Odessa High and Permian –but it is Permian which is known for football, having won several state championships over the past few decades. Odessa, which like most Southern towns has a long history of segregation, is able to find common ground between whites, blacks, and Hispanics on the football field where skin color ceases to matter, though whites and minorities live primarily in distinct neighborhoods apart from one another. Many of the young men on the high school football team in the book are not only born and raised in Odessa, but come to spend most of their lives in Odessa as well.

Permian High

Permian High is one of two high schools found in Odessa, Texas. Permian High's zoning district includes predominantly middle-class students and exceptional minority athletes. Because of this, Permian especially is known for its football program. Permian High, because it is so focused on football, turns a blind eye to its football players, allowing them to get by with just about anything, and helping them to maintain their grades through special treatment to ensure they can play football. Although Permian does not take the 1988 state championship, they do take the 1989 and 1991 championships. As of 2015, Permian has not won another.

Odessa High

Odessa High is one of two high schools found in Odessa, Texas. Odessa High's zoning district means that it is mostly working class white and minority in composition. Many whites and blacks believe the heavy influx of Hispanics as a result of rezoning means that their football program has suffered, as Hispanics do not seem to care about football. Odessa's football program struggles, though its fans do their best to remain supportive. Constantly bested by other schools, including Permian, Odessa's program continues to wither away.

Midland

Midland is a large town up the road from Odessa. Like Odessa, Midland has been built on oil, but where Odessa sometimes booms on oil, Midland thrives. Midland is mainly



middle and upper class in composition, and so both Midland and Odessa look down on one another. Midland, like Odessa, is crazy about football, and its two high schools boast the football teams Midland Lee Rebels and Midland High Bulldogs. The end of the regular season results in a three-way tie between Midland's two teams and the Panthers, but a coin toss sends the Rebels and the Panthers on to the playoffs.

Carter High

Carter High is a heavily-minority school in Dallas, Texas, and is home to the Carter Cowboys, the school's football team. Carter High becomes the center of a national controversy over academics, athletics, cheating, and race when star football player, African-American Gary Edwards, has his grades manipulated so he can play football. Carter goes on to win the state championships, but many of its players, including Edwards, end up in jail for participating in a robbery ring just for fun.



Themes

Small Town Life

Small town life is an important element in the book “Friday Night Lights” by H. G. Bissinger. The concept of a small town includes the social, cultural, economic, and racial make-up of a town such as Odessa, Texas. Later, Midland and the community of Carter in Dallas factor into “Friday Night Lights” in important ways.

Odessa, though it is a small town, is big enough to have two high schools –Odessa High and Permian –but it is Permian which is known for its football program, having won several state championships. Odessa is a very conservative, very Republican, very Christian working and middle-class town built on oil, enjoying booms and suffering busts. The town itself has little to take pride in at the moment. Currently in a bust, the people of town devote even more time and focus than ever on football, something which they know they are good at. Odessa still retains vestiges of racism and segregation like many Southern small towns, but common ground is quickly found between whites, blacks, and Hispanics on the football field where skin color ceases to matter.

In many ways, Midland and Carter are the same. Carter, predominantly minority, has little to be proud of so it focuses on football. Midland, also feeling the trouble of an oil bust, has also focused heavily on its football team. As a result, the communities in Odessa, Midland, and Carter rally around their football teams in immense ways that make the players feel like glorified professionals. Such emphasis is placed on football that it becomes the summit of a kid’s high school career, and indeed in many cases, a person’s life. Many of these kids will never have the same kind of success and fame as in high school, so they take advantage of their celebrity status before they disappear into the faceless crowds of the stands where they come to work menial and blue-collar jobs that do nothing to distinguish them.

In addition to young men wanting to make the most of their small town circumstances through football, they also feel an immense pressure to do well and win once they make the team. Generations of football players have brought up their children to love and play the game, so family expectations run high. Likewise, as is noted early in the book, players carry the weight of the town on their shoulders. They are expected to do well the one thing the town is able to do consistently well no matter what other circumstances the town may find itself in –and that is to play and win at football.

Sense of Community

A sense of community is important in the book “Friday Night Lights” by H. G. Bissinger. Community is inclusive of the unity, participation, and loyalty of a small town. In this case, community in Odessa comes by way of its football program, specifically the Permian High School Panthers.



Given the small town atmosphere and difficult economic situation in which Odessa finds itself, Odessa finds very few things of which it can be proud. Among these things is football, for their team is usually very successful and has, on multiple occasions, secured state championships. As a result, the Panthers really become the town's football team, and the town the team's support system. As Bissinger notes, Panther games are known for drawing twenty-thousand people to the stadiums at which they play. This includes not just parents and immediate families, but extended relatives, friends, locals, and neighbors.

Football season becomes a community effort, not merely with attending games and rooting for the Panthers. Support of the football season begins in August, in pre-season. Parents and locals are known to attend practices to watch and support the team as it trains. Hundreds and hundreds of people also turn out for the Watermelon Feed, where money is raised for the team by way of watermelons and school and team merchandise. The Pepettes are assigned a football player as a partner. The girl makes signs for the player and provides them with sweets before the game.

As supportive as communities can be, they can also be antagonistic and cruel in similar ways. Although Coach Gaines loses just two games in the regular season, thousands of fans turn against him, demand his firing, and organize petitions to achieve this end. "For Sale" signs are even placed on his front lawn, and on the lawn of Brian Chavez. Even positive community support can also be crippling, as football players come to think they are invincible, or that football their senior year will be the highlight of their lives. The reader will consider the case of Gary Edwards, who received national attention for playing despite his bad grades, and who went on to end up in jail within a year for becoming part of a robbery ring for fun, believing nothing would come of it.

Football

Football is an important component in the book "Friday Night Lights" by H. G. Bissinger. Football encompasses more than just the sport itself, but the effect it has on players, fans, the town, and the culture that grows up around it. Football is both a positive and a negative influence in these places, and is crucial to understanding the Panthers' players.

For a small town like Odessa, with little to be proud of economically due to its current period being in an oil bust, places where success is possible –such as in football –are latched onto and celebrated like nothing else. Generations of Odessans have played football and other sports. Since football occupies the consciousness of Odessa, those who play football are held up as celebrities. Given the rural and impoverished nature of the area, playing football for Permian can be either the springboard for playing football at the college level or the highlight of a player's entire life.

Football becomes the highlight of the week and the seasonal highlight of the year for Odessans. They expect nothing less than victory and reward it with great applause and adulation. Odessa's citizens are quick to seek scapegoats for losses. They come down



hard on losses. Gaines is one such target, and Brian Chavez is another, both of whom receive “For Sale” signs on their lawns. Gaines finds himself the subject of a petition calling for his firing, and has a pumpkin smashed on his car –for the unspeakable fault of presiding over two lost games. As a result, the players and coaches are under immense stress and pressure to deliver victories. Boobie cracks under pressure from his injured knee, quitting the team under the belief that without football, he is nothing and nothing can come of his life.

The emphasis placed on football over things like academics and preparing for the future is quietly protested by some parents and elected officials and breaks national news through the case of Gary Edwards. The community support for the football-playing Edwards proves to be his own undoing, as believing he is invincible, he joins a robbery ring for fun, and ends up in jail for sixteen years. Likewise, because they believe football is the highlight of their lives, many players like Jerrod, Hix, Boobie, and others, wish they could go back to relive their time on the field again. Many former players now attend games to live vicariously through the new players just as others once lived vicariously through them.

Family

“Friday Night Lights” by H. G. Bissinger delivers a message about Family relationships. Family involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family proves to be tremendously influential in the novel for the players, both in terms of their decision to play football, and how they manage to be able to play football.

Many of the football players on the Permian Panthers are only the latest in their families to take to the football field. Mike Winchell’s father, who loved and played sports, encouraged his son to play before his death. Mike now plays football not only for love of the game, but in honor of his father in in the desire to make his father proud. Don Billingsley’s father was a Permian Panther football player, and has encouraged his son, Don, to take up the sport as well. Boobie’s Uncle L.V. played basketball while in college, and has encouraged his nephew to continue on in sports. Boobie has selected the paramount sport, football, to do so.

Many of the football players come from impoverished circumstances. Mike’s family, with only one car, must get by as best it can. Mike’s mom drives him to school, and makes sure he is able to get to and from games and practices. L.V. has taken Boobie into his home after Boobie’s difficult childhood and, eventually, his placement in the foster system. L.V. wants Boobie to have a chance, and Boobie credits getting himself straightened out as a teen and getting into football as a result of his uncle’s influence. Even Coach Gaines draws immense comfort from his wife and daughter, who stand by Gaines when public opinion turns against him.



Interestingly enough, many family members –despite their overwhelming support of Permian football –secretly worry about the future for their children. As some parents explain to Bissinger on condition of anonymity, they believe they are setting their children up to fail by placing such emphasis on varsity football rather than academics or the future. As one father explains, kids come to believe that high school football –at the age of seventeen and the age of eighteen –is the high point of their lives and that nothing else matters, either in terms of achievement or that nothing else compares. However, by the present writing of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of “Friday Night Lights,” Odessa has adopted a healthier attitude toward football, which families ensuring their players keep their perspectives on football.

The Future

The future of the players' lives after high school football is important in the book “Friday Night Lights” by H. G. Bissinger. During the season, as well as after the season ends, the Panthers are planning their future games. In regard to future education, football can open or close doors to college education.

Concerns about the future after football manifest themselves early in the book. An unidentified Permian father and football fan notes succinctly that high school sports are a mere moment in a person’s entire life, and that it will end sooner rather than later. For that brief period of time, the father explains, football is all that matters and affords a player a feeling of timelessness, of invincibility, and of celebrity. Unfortunately, all of these things do not last. What the players do not expect, the father explains, is that there is life after football. The greatest example of the letdown following football comes through Gary Edwards, who was rallied around by a community and received national attention over his grades and his playing of football. Edwards, feeling invincible –and bored –following the football season, went on to join a robbery ring for fun, and spent the next sixteen years in jail. Many elected officials share the concerns of Edwards-like situations befalling too many athletes, and so push for academics to be as emphasized as sports.

The Panther players that Bissinger profiles in the book all have at least vague thoughts about the future, if not actual plans. Boobie plans to keep playing football in college and, perhaps, with a pro team. However, his knee injury leaves him unable to follow through with his plans and very few options. Ivory Christian initially wants to be a Marine, then a pastor, and later, a police officer. He plays football because he knows it will benefit him primarily in the short term, even though he hates playing the sport. Mike Winchell sees football as a ticket to college and a way to rise above the poverty of Odessa. Jerrod McDougal believes he will never amount to anything beyond Odessa, and so wishes to live up life as a football player while he can. Don Billingsley, likewise, does not expect much from his life so he parties hard and enjoys life as a football player whenever and however he can. Brian Chavez hopes to play football in college, and to attend Harvard.

The future does not always turn out as expected. Boobie plays ball in college, but can never get as good as he was in high school. He ends up in prison for a stint, has kids,



and shifts from one menial job to the next. Ivory Christian ends up greatly missing football, has a family, and becomes a truck driver. Mike Winchell never marries, and goes on to work for an energy company. Jerrod McDougal never marries, remains local, and ends up working for his family's construction business. Brian Chavez graduates from Harvard and opens a law practice in Odessa. However, his license to practice is suspended because of a fight with his fiancée's ex-husband. Don Billingsley, on the other hand, cleans up and straightens out his life. He marries a wonderful girl and has a daughter with her while he himself comes to work as a consultant. Coach Gaines, after being excoriated for the 1988 season, leads the Panthers to the championship the following year, and is asked to come back two decades later to rejuvenate Permian's football program.



Styles

Structure

H.G. Bissinger writes his book “Friday Night Lights” in the first-person omniscient reflective narrative mode. Bissinger, who traveled to Odessa in the spring of 1988, and spent the next year there with his family, did hundreds of interviews and immense amounts of research to prepare for writing the book. As the book comprises not only the events described relating to football season, but Bissinger’s personal experiences as well, he directly addresses the reader and references himself in various places throughout. For example, in the very first paragraphs of the Preface, Bissinger directly references himself and his desire to understand the hold sports have on small towns. Given that Bissinger is writing about the event after they happened (with the book being published in 1990), his writing takes on a reflective tone in many places –including, for example, in the Afterword. There, Bissinger notes in reflection that he hates going back into the past, recent or distant, because it is a place one can never go again. Everything recalled, it is explained, is a memory, no matter how recent. Given that the events about which Bissinger writes have all taken place in the past, he is aware of the outcomes of the situations, and the futures of the people about which he writes. This omniscience is made possible through the passage of time, as Bissinger devotes most of the Afterword, for example, to catching up with the old players. Additionally, the fact that Bissinger begins with an end-of-season game in the prologue demonstrates that he is already aware of the outcomes of the things about which he is writing. Therefore, he is able to provide important contextual information about different things –such as the true opinion the coaches have about Boobie’s leg injury.

Perspective

H. G. Bissinger writes his book “Friday Night Lights” in language that is personal, simple, and straightforward. Bissinger, who is trained as a journalist, has no difficulty directly addressing his readers, or referencing himself where necessary and appropriate. The book reads as though Bissinger is personally relating an event to the reader face to face, rather than on the paper. This engaging style is complimented by the fact that the language Bissinger uses –straight and to the point –is reflective of his subject: Odessa, and its people. They are working and middle-class people who have no time for the extravagances of people like their neighbors in Midland. There is no standing on ceremony, no fancy language, and no ambivalence in their beliefs. They speak plainly and mean what they say everywhere they are quoted in the book. So, too, does Bissinger, in respect to them. This also makes the book –which itself may be considered a more lengthy read given all of the contextual information it contains about Odessa, Midland, the Gary Edwards situation, and so on –easier to read, follow, and understand.

Tone

H.G. Bissinger divides his book “Friday Night Lights” into eight primary parts, with some of the parts being subdivided into chapters. Some of the chapters themselves are subdivided once again into sections. The Preface, Prologue, Epilogue, and Afterword compose both introductions and conclusions to the book. The four major parts of the book –Pre-Season, The Season, Push for the Playoffs, and Post-Season –compose the bulk of the book and deal with a different part of the 1988 football season.

The chapters within each part have numbers (1 through 16) and titles (such as Chapter 12, Civil War, or Chapter 16, Field of Dreams). Each chapter deals with events, circumstances, or contextual information that add greater depth to the book (such as the chapters devoted to the Gary Edwards case, increasing the reader’s understanding of just how much football has captured the consciousness of some people).

The chapters vary in length. Some situations or periods of time are of such length and/or complexity that they are broken up into subsections. The author has used Roman numerals (such as I, II, III, IV, and so on) for the subsections. Each section deals with a specific set of circumstances, events, or contextual information relating to the overall chapter and part in which it is found. Likewise, whereas the Prologue and Preface serve as an introduction to the book by explaining Bissinger’s desire to write about high school football, the Epilogue and Afterword explain what became of the players featured in the book.



Quotes

The idea had been rattling in my head since I was thirteen years old, the idea of high school sports keeping a town together, keeping it alive. So I went in search of Friday night lights... a real America.

-- H.G. Bissinger (Preface paragraph 2)

Importance: H.G. Bissinger explains his motives for writing the book. He explains since he was young, he has been fascinated by the idea that high school football could be the lifeblood of a small American town. As such, in his thirties, he set off to find such a small town to write about –specifically, Odessa, Texas, which is as close to the heart of real America as one can get.

Athletics lasts for such a short period of time. It ends for people. But while it lasts, it creates this make-believe world where normal rules don't apply...It's Camelot for them. But there's even life after it.

-- Permian High School father (Preface paragraph 21)

Importance: Here, an unidentified Permian father explains to Bissinger the tragedy of football season. He explains that football is a brief season in a long life. The players see football as the summation of their lives. Because football is so celebrated, it makes it seem like football is the ultimate pinnacle of life, even though the vast extent of a kid's life comes long after high school. Yet the kids live in the moment, because they know they will never have that moment again.

It's just a part of our lives. It's just something that you're involved in. It's just like going to church or something like that. It's just what you do.

-- Bob Rutherford (Chapter 2, The Watermelon Feed paragraph 14)

Importance: A real estate agent named Bob Rutherford explains clearly and succinctly why the community of Odessa rallies around and supports their football team. It is a natural part of everyday life. It is in their genetic makeup, having been passed down through the generations. With good reason, football is compared to church. For the people in Odessa, church is a hallmark of their lives that brings the community together unlike anything else, except football.

But now he was a senior and had had a whole year to process the incredible feeling of walking into a stadium and seeing twenty-thousand fans expecting the world from him. He seemed ready, ready for something truly wonderful to happen to him.

-- H.G. Bissinger (Chapter 4, Dreaming of Heroes, I paragraph 19)

Importance: Following the death of his father and the encouragement of his brother, Mike Winchell gets into football and ultimately becomes quarterback. Mike looks forward to a good year, and to good things happening. He also knows that, as the quarterback, he will have the public's eye on him like no one else, and knows that tens of thousands



of people will be expecting something amazing from him. He hopes and prays he will not disappoint.

We fit as athletes, but we really don't fit as a part of society... We know we're separate, until we get on the field. We know that we're equal as athletes.

-- Nate Hearne (Chapter 5, Black and White, IV paragraph 5)

Importance: Following desegregation in Odessa in 1982, the only place where integration begins is on the football field. There, blacks are valued for their ability to contribute to football, and are accepted on the field. Nate Hearne, the only black coach for Permian football, notes that it is only on the field where blacks are initially accepted, whereas everywhere else in society, they aren't accepted.

Football reigns, football is king. In Odessa, it's God, country, and Mojo football.

-- Vickie Gomez (Chapter 7, School Days, III paragraph 12)

Importance: Vickie Gomez, a former school board member, sums up the degree to which football occupies the lives of the students and residents of Odessa. Football determines everything from the school budget to the social standing of kids who attend school. Gomez is among those who enjoy football, but wish other things, like academics, could be improved or given the attention they deserve and require. She believes that there is no telling how well Odessa or the town's graduates could be doing if academics were taken seriously.

When he returned to practice and discovered his reduction in status, he was livid. It wasn't supposed to be this way, not his senior year.

-- H.G. Bissinger (Chapter 10, Boobie Who? I paragraph 8)

Importance: Several weeks after being injured, Boobie is at last allowed to return to the practice field. By then, in the fickle and fast-paced nature of high school football, Boobie might as well not exist anymore because he has been out for so long. Additionally, there is the shame of having been demoted from starter to sub, and being forced to wear a white sub shirt during practices rather than the black shirt starters wear during practices. Boobie is very angry.

That was the very nature of sports in a town like this. Football stood at the very core of what the town was about, not on the outskirts, not on the periphery. I had nothing to do with entertainment and everything to do with how people felt about themselves.

-- H.G. Bissinger (Chapter 12, Civil War, I paragraph 14)

Importance: With football being so central to Odessa, wins are celebrated and defeats are blamed on the coach. Sharon, wife of Coach Gaines, finds it difficult to listen to the way people tear apart her husband and shred his reputation whenever there is a loss. She knows this is natural for a place where football is so ingrained in the town's consciousness. However, it does nothing to comfort her because she loves and respects her husband so deeply. She knows that people do not realize how much time a coach and his family put into football.



Since only two teams could go to the playoffs, the district's tiebreaker rule went into effect: a coin toss. After all that work and all those endless hours, it seemed silly. But that's what the outcome of the season had finally been reduced to...

-- H.G. Bissinger (Chapter 13, Heads or Tails, I paragraph 2)

Importance: The Permian Panthers, the Midland Lee Rebels, and the Midland High Bulldogs are all tied for first. Only two of these teams can go to the playoffs. Which two will be decided by a coin toss conducted by the teams' three coaches, a very anticlimactic outcome to a season of struggle. Ultimately, the Panthers and the Rebels are slated for the playoffs.

I know it's been a long season, hittin' and runnin' and gassers and all that stuff, I know it's not any fun. Hell, it never has been and it never will be any fun but it's the reward you get for payin' the price, payin' your dues, okay? That's why you do it and that's why we want you to do it and that's why we ask you to do it.

-- Coach Belew (Chapter 14, Friday Night Addiction, I paragraph 23)

Importance: Coach Belew, who works with the defensive ends, is encouraging the team as they enter the final sixteen in the playoffs. Belew is straight with the players, telling them he knows they work hard and that it is never any fun –but it is the reward of winning that is the payoff for having worked so hard that matters now. He reminds them that they are not out of the woods yet, and their time to win is now.

I'd give anything to go back out there.

-- Jerry Hix (Chapter 14, Friday Night Addiction, II paragraph 20)

Importance: H.G. Bissinger interviews a man, now in his late twenties, who was formerly a Panther football star. Jerry Hix explains to Bissinger that nothing in life can compare to the seasons of football he played for Permian. No longer being able to play has left a huge hole in his life that he can never fill, no matter how good his life is. This demonstrates just how important football is to the players and to the town. It consumes everyone. Hix has the vast majority of his life still ahead of him, but he feels as if it already peaked when he was a senior in high school because the one thing someone can be famous for like nothing else is football.

I want to resurrect those memories, or at least the memory of those memories... I hate going back in my life for the very reason it means going back...

-- H.G. Bissinger (Afterword paragraph 2)

Importance: Twenty-five years after the publication of "Friday Night Lights" and years after both a film and a television show based on the book, Bissinger seeks to catch up with the players he profiled in the 1990 book. Those players reflect fondly on their time on the field, how much it meant to them, and how much they miss it now. Recalling those times is a bittersweet experience because those players cannot go back. Ironically, Bissinger is much the same way. He hates reflecting on the past and revisiting it because it is a place to which people can never return.



Topics for Discussion

Small Towns

Describe the town of Odessa. Include information about its social, cultural, economic, and racial atmosphere. How do these factors affect everyday life in the small town, as well as the town's attitude about sports? Compare Odessa compare to the communities of Midland and Carter.

Small Towns

H.G. Bissinger explains that his primary motivation for writing "Friday Night Lights" was to find out why Americans show so much interest in sports. He also wanted to know how a high school football game had the power to keep a town together during difficult times. Is Bissinger successful in finding answers to his questions? Explain your answer. In your opinion, why do small towns care so much about sports, especially football?

Community

Bissinger notes that the sense of community in Odessa is immense when it comes to football. Why is this so? Does it seem that community has a more positive or negative effect in Odessa, or does it rest somewhere in between? Explain your position using examples from the book.

Community

Bissinger is able to point out the negative effects the community's obsession with football has on Odessa. Some people in the town are often intentionally or unwittingly blind to these effects. What is the reason for their blindness? Why are some citizens able to see the negative effects of football on the community when others are not?

Football

While athletics are prominent in life in Odessa, football stands paramount over all other sports. Why is this so? Why are so many Panther football players themselves sons or relatives of former players? Why do players like Ivory Christian choose to play football, even when they dislike it?



Football

How does playing football affect the everyday lives of football players at Permian? How does football influence the daily lives of all those around the players, such as family members and friends? Support your answer with textual evidence.

Family

Families are tremendously important to Permian Panther football players because the family unit is a central source of support and loyalty. Select three players from the book and describe their family situations. How do these situations affect their decision to play football.

Family

Many family members –despite their overwhelming support of Permian football – secretly worry about the future for their children. As some parents explain to Bissinger on condition of anonymity, they believe they are setting their children up to fail by placing such emphasis on varsity football, rather than academics or the future. Yet, these parents do not vocally speak up or seek to aggressively change things. Why is this so? Are these parents to be faulted for their stances and inaction? Why or why not?

The Future

Concerns about the future lives of Permian football players after football manifest themselves early in the book. An unidentified Permian father and football fan notes succinctly that high school sports are a mere moment in a person's entire life. For the most part, players do not always think about life after football. Why is this so?

The Future

The futures that the Permian players plan for themselves at the age of eighteen and where they end up twenty-five years later are drastically different. Choose three players profiled in the book. Describe their dreams and plans for the future between 1988 and 1990. What are their lives like in 2015?