Friday Night Lights

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BUZZ BISSINGER

After attending Phillips Academy and the University of Pennsylvania, Bissinger worked as a journalist at the Philadelphia *Inquirer* and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting in that city. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* was named "the best football book of all time" by *Sports Illustrated*. He has written articles on journalistic plagiarism, essays about his life and family, and other works of political and social criticism and sports storytelling. His books include: *Father's Day*, *Shooting Stars*, *3 Nights in August*, and *A Prayer for the City*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Friday Night Lights is set against the backdrop of the social, political, and economic upheaval of the 1980s, in Texas and in the US at large. In the late 1970s, the US was coming out of what many felt to be a period of national "malaise" (the word was mistakenly ascribed to a speech Jimmy Carter made). The Vietnam War's messy end—effectively a defeat for the US—combined with a sluggish economy and rising prices, caused some Americans to fear that the "American Dream" was no longer viable. The election of Ronald Reagan, in 1980, bolstered the spirits of those on the political right, who felt that America had drifted away from its roots, as a independent, tough-minded country of hard-working people. Reagan, who was initially famous as a Hollywood actor, was a gifted speaker and phrasemaker, and his Presidency combined with booms in some parts of the US economy, including the banking and financial sectors. The oil industry, as Bissinger points out, was up and down in the 1980s, following its historical boom-bust cycle. When oil was expensive—when prices set by OPEC in the Middle East favored the US—communities like Odessa thrived. But when demand slackened or supply become too great, oil prices cratered, and the bubbles in West Texas and other oil regions popped, causing great economic hardship for many, including the characters in *Friday Night Lights*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* is best judged alongside other sports books of the twentieth century, especially those that, like *FNL*, are of literary merit: well-written, in-depth, and unwilling to settle for the clichés of victory and defeat. *Ball Four* (1970), by former Seattle Pilots pitcher Jim Bouton, is a wry take on the life of a major-league baseball player, including not just the thrill of the game but the boredom of sitting around and traveling, and the stunts and pranks players pull when not on the field. *Paper Lion* (1965), by George Plimpton, details the author's stint with the Detroit Lion; Plimpton was also famous as one of the cofounders of *The Paris Review* literary magazine. *North Dallas Forty* (1973), by Peter Gent, was made into a move of the same name, starring Nick Nolte; it, like *Ball Four*, portrayed its sport (football) without the tried-and-true wisdom and sentimentality that some had come to expect in sports writing up to that point. *A Fan's Notes* (1968), by Fred Exley, is, at least nominally, about the author's life watching the New York Giants, and Frank Gifford, their star running back. But, like *Friday Night Lights*, *A Fan's Notes* becomes more about the towns in which Exley lives, and the things he and others go through while sports play on in the background.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, a Dream*
- **When Written:** 1988-89
- **Where Written:** Odessa and Philadelphia
- **When Published:** 1990
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary non-fiction
- **Genre:** Non-fiction; sports; social criticism
- **Setting:** Odessa, in West Texas
- **Climax:** The Permian Panthers lose a close came to Carter High School, in Austin, during the state semifinals of the 1988 football season.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Adaptations. *Friday Night Lights* has been made into two separate TV series—in the 1990s and the 2000s—and a movie. The movie and second (NBC) TV show received a great deal of critical attention and largely positive reviews.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Friday Night Lights*, reporter and writer Buzz Bissinger, from Philadelphia, moves with his family to West Texas during the 1988 Permian High School football season. Bissinger intends to document that team's ups and downs as it pursues a state championship. Located in Odessa, near the much larger and more affluent city of Midland, and in the middle of West-Texas oil country, Permian High has a long tradition of football excellence, and much of the school's energies are devoted to football—occasionally at the expense of academic rigor, and of fairness to students who do not play.

Bissinger introduces several key players for the Permian

Panthers, also known by their nickname MOJO: Ivory Christian, a gifted middle linebacker; Boobie Miles, a mercurial running back, whose season is cut short by a knee injury; Brian Chavez, whose excellent defensive abilities are matched only by his strong academic performance in the classroom; Jerrod McDougal, another defensive player, whose father has experienced professional trouble after the oil bust of the late '80s; Mike Winchell, a talented but anxious quarterback; and Don Billingsley, a running back whose father, Charlie, was once a star on the Permian team, and is now a troubled alcoholic.

As the season progresses, Bissinger tracks the performance of each of these players, and of their parents and guardians (most notably, Boobie's uncle LV), as they cheer on the Panthers. Permian begins the season well, with a blow-out victory, but loses a tough game out of conference to Marshall, only to bounce back with another blow-out win, only to lose a close game to Midland Lee, perhaps Permian's closest rival. Permian wins out the remainder of the season, going 7-2, but its coach, Gary Gaines, must win a coin flip with the coaches of Midland Lee and Midland High, in order for Permian to make the playoffs. Gaines, along with the Midland Lee coach, win the flip, and Permian makes a run toward the state title, ultimately into the final four, where it loses a tough game to a Dallas school, Carter High School, in the state semifinals.

Throughout this narrative, Bissinger tells the twin story of the ups and downs of the town of Odessa: its rivalry with local economic power Midland, where George H. W. Bush and his wife Barbara once lived; its difficulties with issues of race (**black-white** tension) and segregation; the educational compromises school districts in Texas make in order to favor their football teams. By the end of the book, Bissinger's commentary on football in Texas is mixed. Although he identifies it as a source of pride for many Texas communities, he, like some local politicians and advocates, fears that far too much pressure is placed on the shoulders of 17 and 18 year-old boys, who feel that, once football is gone in high school, their lives are over. Bissinger wonders whether it is healthy for societies to claim that, for some of its "chosen" players, life never gets better than their senior year in high school, and, also, whether it is healthy for the communities themselves that they place so much more emphasis on football as opposed to other things.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Buzz Bissinger – The author of *Friday Night Lights*, Bissinger is present in the text as he interviews players, coaches, and fans, and describes what life is like in Odessa, Texas. Bissinger maintains an objective stance throughout much of the book—for example, calling the games as though he were a sportscaster—but his opinions about the dominance of football in Texas culture, and about the erosion of school standards in the region, become clear by the book's end. Bissinger also notes that he has come to respect and admire many of the players and coaches with whom he has interacted throughout the 1988 Permian High season.

Gary Gaines – Coach of the Permian Panthers, Gary Gaines is tagged by some in the community as "too soft" to lead his team to the ultimate goal—a state championship. Although Permian loses to Carter in the state semis in 1988, Bissinger reports that, in 1989, Permian wins the state title, guaranteeing that Gaines gets to keep his job—at least for a little while, since the culture of West Texas football demands continued success.

Boobie Miles – A talented African American running back on the Permian squad with dreams of playing Division I college football, Boobie injures his knee in a preseason scrimmage and must sit out much of the season. When he returns, midway through the Panthers' campaign, he finds that he runs "tentatively," and is effectively benched in favor of junior Chris Comer, who is having a breakout year. The white coaches of the team often think that Miles is too self-centered, and not tough enough. Miles eventually quits the team to get season-ending knee surgery and, out of frustration with his uncle LV, moves out of the home they share for a time, before returning and playing football for a local two-year junior college. He never achieves the level of play he once expected.

Mike Winchell – Permian's quarterback, Mike Winchell is a talented passer with a love for the game. But Winchell, whose father died when he was a young boy, is often beset by worry when he is on the field, and occasionally his anxiety keeps him from throwing the ball accurately. Winchell is not recruited out of high school, but briefly plays football as a walk-on at Baylor, a university in Waco, Texas.

Jerrod McDougal – A utility defender for the Panthers, McDougal's family has lost a great deal of money in the oil bust of the late 1980s, and McDougal is frustrated by what he considers the two major emphases of Texas life: oil and football. But McDougal also does not see a way out of these two "industries," and he plays and enjoys football because he feels it is the thing he ought to do, as a young man in Texas. McDougal is devastated after Permian's loss to Carter in the state semis.

Ivory Christian – A gifted middle linebacker, Ivory Christian is "ambivalent," as Bissinger describes it, about football, and wants, after high school, to become a Christian preacher at a local church in the African American Southside of Odessa. But Christian is later offered a scholarship by TCU—Texas Christian University—which he accepts. Christian gives up on his dream of preaching, and commits himself, once again, to football, at least during his university education.

Brian Chavez – The valedictorian of his class, Brian Chavez is also a strong and methodical defensive end for Permian.

Chavez, unlike many of the other players, has clear plans after high school: he wants to go to Harvard, which he does, and from which he graduates (without playing college football). Chavez, as Bissinger notes, later becomes a lawyer back in West Texas, like his father, Tony.

Don Billingsley – A running back for Permian, and a "rabble-rouser" who drinks and fights on the weekends, Don Billingsley is known as one of the most attractive boys at Permian High, and his attentions are sought after by many of the Pepettes, the Mojo cheer squad. Billingsley has trouble holding onto the football early in the season, and is largely, although not entirely, replaced by Chris Comer at running back—a star for Permian.

Charlie Billingsley – Don Billingsley's father, Charlie, too, was a running back for Permian, arguably more talented than Don—but Charlie shares Don's propensity for drinking, womanizing, and fighting. By the end of the football season, Charlie has drifted away from Don, and is back in rehab, having tried, and failed, to remain sober to watch Don play.

LV – Boobie Miles' uncle, LV, dreamed of being a football player as a young man, but could not because his segregated high school did not have a team. LV, by his own admission, invests a great deal of time and energy into training Boobie to be a better running back, and to have a career in football in college. LV and Boobie have a fight during 1989, causing Boobie to leave home, but the two, as Bissinger notes, eventually reconcile when Boobie goes off to play in junior college.

Laurence Hurd – A prominent black preacher in Odessa, who spoke out in the 1980s against segregation in Ector County schools, Laurence Hurd is convicted of burglary and sentenced to prison, tarnishing his reputation (and similarly to that of Willie Hammond). Bissinger interviews Hurd, who has a hard time explaining why he gave up his position of influence to commit a crime. Bissinger notes that both Hurd and Hammond are evidence, for some white members of the community, of African American men whose influence leads to criminal behavior.

Aaron Giebel – A businessman interviewed by Buzz Bissinger about his role in the boom and bust of the 1980s, Aaron Giebel talks about the enormous wealth he accumulated during the oil boom, in oil prospecting. Giebel ended up losing nearly all this money when the bust occurred; normally a sensible and cautious investor, Giebel admits to having been "crazed" by the allure of big profits during the boom.

Gary Edwards – A high school football player at Carter, and very gifted both on offense and defense, Gary Edwards became famous in the state for his Algebra II grade, which was determined, eventually, by a state supreme court ruling. Edwards' grade, which was raised to above a 70 by the ruling, allowed him to play for Carter in the playoffs—where they eventually defeated Permian.

Will Bates – Gary Edwards' algebra teacher, Bates initially awards Edwards a failing grade, which causes the chain of court rulings resulting in that grade being lifted to above a 70. Bates, for his part, is "moved" to the middle school, where is no longer in charge of Dallas football players' grades—thus ensuring that Carter High can continue to dominate on the field, without fear of academic "meddling."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Chris Comer – A junior running back, Chris Comer has a breakout season after Boobie Miles' injury, taking the starting job from him and from Don Billingsley, another senior.

Nate Hearne – An African American assistant coach at Permian—one of the very few—Hearne convinces Boobie to stay on the team early in the season, after Comer has taken Boobie's job in the starting lineup.

Trapper – The Panthers' athletic trainer, Trapper believes that Boobie puts himself before the team, and that, after his injury, Boobie refuses to play through the pain of his knee injury.

Coach Belew – An assistant coach for the Panthers, Belew accompanies Coach Gaines on their trip to the coin flip against the two Midland High Schools.

Shawn Crow – A former Permian star during the 1987 season That year, Shawn Crow leads Permian to the state semis, playing through pain. After that season he was hobbled by a herniated disc, which causes him to miss the first season of his college career.

Billy Winchell – Mike Winchell's father, who dies of injuries sustained during a work accident when Mike is a boy. Billy Winchell encourages his son to play football, and to do in dedicated fashion, without complaint.

Lanita Atkins – A secretary at a local oil company, Lanita Atkins is a prominent liberal spokesperson on **white-black** issues, and activist in Odessa, a town not known for its liberal political views. Bissinger interviews Lanita to hear her views regarding football in West Texas, and its impact on local communities.

Willie Hammond, Jr. – The first black city council member in Odessa, Willie Hammond, Jr., is later convicted of arson for a complicated plot to burn down a building in town, one he and others wished to redevelop.

Pastor Hanson – A pastor at Ivory Christian's church in Odessa, Pastor Hanson encourages Ivory to preach while playing football, but cautions him against giving up the game entirely, since Christian is so talented.

Odell Beckham – An extremely talented running back for the Marshall High football team, Odell Beckham is one of the primary reasons Marshall defeats Permian early in the season, prompting some in Odessa to call for Coach Gaines' firing.

Sharon Gaines – The wife of coach Gary Gaines, Sharon Gaines is often sick with worry during the football season, since she

knows that one or two losses could doom her husband's career, and spark the outrage of community members throughout Odessa.

Hugh Hayes – The superintendent of Ector County, in which Odessa is located, Hugh Hayes worries that football, though important, has been given too much attention in the local schools, to the detriment of their educational performance.

LaRue Moore – An English teacher at Permian High, LaRue Moore, like Hugh Hayes, worries that perhaps football has warped the school's academic mission, tilting everything toward performance on the field, rather than in the classroom.

Tony Chavez – The father of Brian Chavez, Tony Chavez worked his way through university and law school to become a prominent Latino lawyer in the east side of Odessa, Permian's home base and a community dominated by white middle-class families.

John Wilkins – The former coach of Permian, winner of a state championship in 1980, John Wilkins is the Ector County athletic director, and is known as "Darth Vader" for the grimness of his demeanor during athletic contests.

Derric Evans – Another star player for Carter, Derric Evans dominates Permian on offense and defense. Evans and Edwards, who both receive D-1 football scholarships, are arrested and sentenced to significant jail time for their role in armed robberies in the spring of 1989, destroying their college careers before they begin.

Jerry Hix, Joe Bob Bizzell, and Daniel Justis – Three former Permian players, whom Bissinger interviews during the state semis. Jerry Hix, Joe Bob Bizzell, and Daniel Justis talk longingly about their time on the field for the Panthers, even as they admit that football has ravaged their bodies, and left them with life-long injuries.

Nicole Gaines – The daughter of Gary Gaines and Sharon Gaines.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FOOTBALL

H. G. ("Buzz") Bissinger's *Friday Nights Lights* is an examination of football in one especially football-mad part of the country: the small town of Odessa, in West Texas. Football is the most popular sport in the region, and high-school football games dominate the cultures of the region's communities. Some games draw 15,000-20,000 fans—large percentages of the population. The Permian stadium is a sea of **black** during games. Bissinger explores the influence of football in Odessa, and the performance of one team, the Permian High School Panthers (also nicknamed "Mojo"), who have been successful since the 1960s. Bissinger tracks six important players on that team, all seniors: Boobie Miles, Brian Chavez, Jerrod McDougal, Don Billingsley, Mike Winchell, and Ivory Christian. Bissinger also follows the life of the coach—Gary Gaines—and interviews other educational, sports, and political figures in the region, who relate in some way to the Permian Panthers.

Bissinger finds that, in Odessa, football also serves as a metaphor for the way people live their lives and for what they value. Odessa is oil country, a tough patch of desert—not an easy place to raise a family or earn a steady living. The economy, toward the end of the 1980s, has been floundering. Football is not just a game the community can rally around, but a sign of resolve and strength, including: one's ability to endure through pain; one's ability to master self-doubt, despite physical disadvantage; and one's faith-system and ethics. Coaches fault Boobie, for example—despite an unlucky knee injury—because they feel he has not practiced hard enough, and does not put the team's achievements before his own. The town of Odessa sees its own values reflected in the grit and hard work of the Permian Panthers football team, and judges the team and the players on that basis.

Bissinger demonstrates that football is not simply entertainment, but a way for Odessans to salve the pain of a life that is, outside the confines of the stadium, complex, confusing, and often disheartening. Indeed, many citizens of Odessa, quoted throughout the book, argue that, without Permian football, their lives in West Texas would be almost meaningless. Although Bissinger quotes these men and women without much comment, it is clear that he wonders, throughout the book, whether the football successes and failures of 17- and 18-year-olds are important enough to warrant such devotion. Bissinger also demonstrates the attention that could be paid to other aspects of these Texas communities that suffer, even as the football teams succeed.

Bissinger concludes on a mixed note. For him, football is still an exciting game, one of passion and athletic excellence. But Bissinger also notes the toll the game takes on the players and fans: physical, economic, even moral.

RACE AND RACIAL DIVISIONS

Bissinger explores the racial divides that he finds during his investigation of football in the region. Texas, like many states in the South, has a checkered history since *Brown vs. Board of Education*, in the mid-50's, the Supreme Court case which mandated the desegregation of public schools. Originally, there were Odessa and Ector high schools in Ector County, where Odessa is

located. Odessa High was largely white, and filled mostly with members of the "downtown" community in Odessa, which was wealthier. Ector, on the other hand, was located on the Southside, on "the other side of the tracks" figuratively and literally. Ector High was largely African American and Latino in its student population.

Ector did not have enough students—or so it was claimed—for a football team, and Odessa High, until the early 1960s, was the football powerhouse in the region. Then, in the '60s, Permian High was formed on the east side of town, a wealthier community even than the downtown, which drew white families away from Odessa High. Permian became the new football powerhouse, well into the 1980s and including the events of the book (the 1988 season). Odessa High, for its part, became a largely Latino district with a mediocre football team, and Ector was closed as part of an originally well-intentioned, but ultimately failed, attempt to integrate the county's schools. In fact, Permian was accused by members of the Odessa High community of redrawing football boundaries to ensure that, if black students were going to come to Permian, they would be black students capable of improving the football team. Odessa tended not to be able to "recruit" students from the Southside.

Many stereotypes about different ethnic groups crop up throughout the book. Bissinger quotes some whites in Odessa as arguing that African American players tend to be athletically superior but somehow intellectually lacking. African Americans play some positions—including running back—but no mention is ever made of a black quarterback, certainly not for Permian. Latino players are also denigrated as not having the right stuff for big-time Texas football. White players, by contrast, are often lauded for their "heart" and "hard work." Bissinger is also struck by the casual use of derogatory racial language on the part of whites in the community. African Americans, in the view of many whites in the Odessa region, are mostly important insofar as they can help the Permian Panthers win a state title.

While Bissinger's portrayal shows a town in which racial reconciliation seems difficult, if not impossible, to solve, Bissinger does suggest that the players tend to relate to one another directly, without as much concern for stereotypical narratives. One player, Brian Chavez, of the Permian Panthers, is Latino, son of a lawyer, valedictorian of his class, and off to Harvard at the end of the book. Players like and respect Chavez, viewing him as a leader in the locker room. Despite this, however, some racial stereotypes seem not to fade away. The black player Boobie Miles, for his part, leaves the team and is derided by the mostly white coaching staff, who feel that Miles cares more about his own performance than the improvement of the team's fate.

WEALTH, POVERTY, AND THE BOOM-BUST CYCLE

Odessa is an oil town. Its wealth derives from oil-drilling in the region, and from industries related to it: pipe-building, construction, distribution. The oil industry, despite its pro-American rhetoric and close ties to the politics of the Texas Republican party, is, as Bissinger points out, highly dependent on other countries in the late-1980s. OPEC—the cartel of Middle Eastern oil-supplying countries—sets prices, for the most part, and because their supply is so much more significant than that of West Texas, what OPEC says becomes the rule. Early in the 1980s, oil is expensive per barrel (the boom), but by the later part of that decade, oil is just over $5 a barrel (the bust). White-collar industries related to oil tend to have a gambler's ethos—one spends a lot and bets more when one's up, and when one's down, one continues spending money to find another winning streak. Other industries in the region—notably banking—are dependent on financing the oil booms, and they, too, get caught up in the busts, meaning that the economy of the region goes from high highs to low lows very quickly, often without much warning.

Because of the cruelty of the boom-bust cycle, divisions between wealthy and poor citizens in Odessa tend to be stark—even though the wealthy can become poor very quickly. Typically, when white-collar families try to make money in the boom, they then spend that money quickly, such that, when the bust comes (and it always does), those families tend to have very little of what they've gained. These financial gains tend also to be divided unevenly between parts of town. Thus the Permian part of Odessa—the east side—is far wealthier than the downtown, which in turn is wealthier than the Southside.

Bissinger tracks the relationship between the economic background of players and their lives after football. Some players, like Billingsley, become successful despite disadvantaged backgrounds—they tend to succeed through a combination of hard work, luck, and a system that is skewed toward the success of affable white men in Texas. Some other players, like Boobie, seem more trapped in the economic and ethnic circumstances of the region. Boobie fails out of junior college and does not end up living his dream of a D-1 football scholarship. He has a difficult time "getting ahead," because the economy of the region overall is so poor, and because Boobie's time at Permian was so thoroughly dominated by athletic, rather than academic and professional, preparation.

EDUCATION

The Permian Panthers are, of course, the football team for Permian High School—although, in Bissinger's account, it's clear that football is the priority for many Texas schools rather than a comprehensive high-school educational program. Bissinger notes that SAT

scores and other indicators of performance are especially low in Odessa and West Texas, although the entire state lags behind many others in the country, as far as the strength of its high schools. Bissinger argues that football players receive preferential treatment—including one player at Carter High near Dallas, whose scores in Algebra II are effectively doctored by the district, so that the player remains academically eligible. Bissinger is continually shocked by the willingness of school administrators to cut corners academically in order to ensure success athletically. Permian High players, however, are not all bad students. Some work harder than others, especially Brian Chavez, whose academic excellence is matched only by his passion for football.

Bissinger argues, however, that football warps the academic culture of places like Permian—making things far too easy for athletes, and lowering the standards generally, so that all students in the school don't work as hard as they could. Bissinger quotes teachers from Odessa high schools, who claim that standards have eroded over the years, and that, perhaps, the rampant culture of football is to blame.

For Bissinger, however, football *is* a part of these young men's educational experience—the coaches do teach them things, and the players work extremely hard during the year to become outstanding football players. The question, then, is whether they learn the right lessons. Gary Gaines, the head coach, tends to support his players, and to ask of them to give their best effort. Gaines can be a tough coach, but he doesn't scream at his players, and he's in fact accused of being too soft on them, especially when the team is losing. Other assistants, however, do curse at the players, accuse them of being lazy, and otherwise argue that football is about a gladiator-like toughness. Bissinger argues that some of the lessons football instills are important ones: especially teamwork and a commitment to something outside the self. But, Bissinger goes on, some other "football lessons," like the overwhelming pressure placed on winning, seem at best misbegotten, and, at worst, detrimental to the future lives of the young players, who are, after all, learning these lessons in high school, at an impressionable age.

WINNING, LOSING, AND A PURPOSE IN LIFE

Bissinger follows the Panthers through a difficult season. At first, it appears that the talented Permian team will underperform, especially after Permian loses to its rival Midland Lee. But Permian rights the ship and ends up in a three-way tie for a berth in the district playoffs. Coach Gaines participates in a coin flip that sends the Panthers and Midland Lee to the playoffs, and leaves the Midland High team out. The Panthers make it all the way to the state semifinals, before ultimately losing in a close contest to Carter High School, a largely African-American school near Dallas. The game is a rancorous one, with tensions flaring between **white and black** communities represented in the stands. Bissinger notes that Gaines wants to win—sometimes desperately—but that others in Odessa feel Gaines does not try hard enough, or does not demand enough from his players.

For many on the Permian Panthers team and community, there is nothing more important than winning, and in the community at large, thousands share this sentiment. Anything less than a state championship is not good enough. But Bissinger broadens the conversation of winning and losing beyond the football field. His book discusses the lives of the players, coaches, and fans, and asks whether the binary of winning vs. losing is enough to encapsulate an entire life—one that is not a game, but a set of decisions and circumstances that often don't have the clarity of a football matchup. Bissinger wonders whether it's valuable or helpful for high-school students to conceive of this small period of time as determinant of the rest of their lives—especially since another crop of students will fill in the following year, and do exactly the same.

Bissinger also questions whether the community is right to put so much pressure on the winning record of a bunch of 17- and 18-year-old young men. Bissinger implies that many in the town are living through the football team because other circumstances—economic, familial—outside football are so difficult in West Texas. For Bissinger, the dependence in Odessa on the high-school team is a mixed blessing—a sign of community togetherness that actually warps the community, changes priorities, and perhaps causes as much harm as good. Bissinger concludes the book ambiguously: thankful for his time in Texas, and his experience in a world unfamiliar to him—but wondering, too, whether all the hoopla, all the money and time, and all the physical and mental anguish is worth it for the players, coaches, and fans. Bissinger, after all, recognizes what some in the book do, and others refuse to: that football is only a game, but that its impact in the community is far greater, perhaps, than any game ought to have. Bissinger believes that those who are able to view football for what it really is are better able to cope with the triumphs and difficulties, the "winning" and "losing," of a life that extends beyond the hash-marks of a football field.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BLACK AND WHITE

Throughout *Friday Night Lights*, author Buzz Bissinger traces a set of recurring colors—black and white, and how they are manifest in the community of Odessa, in West Texas. Of course, most immediately, black and

white represent the racial divisions of that region. The town of Odessa is itself clearly divided between its white east side, its Latino west side, and its African American south side, which literally sits on the "other side of the tracks." Permian High's football team is largely white, although a few African American players, like Boobie, Chris Comer, and Ivory Christian contribute a great deal to the team's success, and are seen as stars in the community. Compounding this, the Permian Panthers' school colors are black—designed to be intimidating—and the stands at Permian's field are filled with black t-shirts and hats on game day.

Unfortunately, the African-American "stars" on the football field are not afforded equal treatment off it, and are often perceived of differently by their coaches. Thus Bissinger traces a larger set of symbolic values for "whiteness" and "blackness." The purity Bissinger finds in the struggle on the football field, the moral clarity of beating the enemy between the hash-marks, is a stark, "black and white," "us vs. them" division. This competitive division is found, too, in the boom-bust cycle of the oil industry, in which fortunes are made and lost quickly—when you're up, you're up, and when you're down, the world seems bleak and futureless. Football provides a set of clear, black-and-white decisions in a world that, as Bissinger describes it, is economically, politically, and socially complex—more muddy and gray than many residents of Odessa would like to admit. In this way, "black and white" provides both a comfort to the town in its simplicity, and yet also describes many of the town's problematic difficulties, in terms of the divisions that separate its citizens.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Perseus edition of *Friday Night Lights* published in 1990.

Prologue Quotes

The tingling sensation stayed with him, and he knew that when he stepped on that field tonight he wouldn't feel like a football player at all but like someone . . . entering a glittering, barbaric arena.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Jerrod McDougal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Jerrod is preparing for a "big game," and Bissinger goes to great lengths to show that, for the Panthers, each game is bigger than the next. Football, for these high school juniors and seniors, is the center of their lives. Winning and losing are not only aspects of that game—they are aspects of a life lived well, in a town (Odessa) where other kinds of success (namely, economic) are relatively hard to come by, and harder to maintain.

Bissinger explicitly compares football to the combat of ancient Roman gladiators here, and though that analogy might seem forced at this point, it holds up as the books goes on. Players are often injured for the cause. People in the stands cheer when their team wins, and boo harshly for their opponents. And the game is at the center of the town's social life: hence the "Friday Night Lights" of the book's title, which bathe Odessa in a cool glow once a week in the fall.

Boobie stood in the corner of the darkened room with his arms folded . . . 'I quit, coach, they got a good season goin'."

Related Characters: Boobie Miles (speaker), Nate Hearne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Boobie is upset that his season might be over, and that he won't get a chance to prove himself on the field because of his injury. Football has helped Boobie to escape a difficult childhood, and his caretaker, LV, has encouraged Boobie to focus on being a great running back, perhaps at the expense of Boobie's classroom education. So there is a lot riding on Boobie's time at Permian; he can only go to college if he receives an athletic scholarship.

But this passage is also tinged with the racial politics that run throughout the book. Black coaches for the Permian Panthers tend to support black players, and white coaches white players. Sometimes white coaches express the idea that certain black players are more concerned with their individual achievements than with team ones. These criticisms aren't fair, nor are they grounded in reasoned opinions. Instead, Permian exhibits the same racial prejudices—largely of white Americans against Latino/a and African Americans—that can be found throughout Texas, and indeed throughout the country, toward the end of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1: Odessa Quotes

❝ There were a few who found its conservatism maddening and dangerous and many more who found it the essence of what America should be, an America built on strength and the spirit of individualism, not an America built on handouts and food stamps.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Bissinger applies the "boom-bust" mentality of the Permian football team—where winning is everything—to the economic situation of the Odessa region, and of Texas more broadly. Oil wealth is built on prospecting. It's based on on people, typically men, who invest a lot of money, like gamblers, on wells that may or may not prove rich with oil. Prospecting creates the illusion that wealth is generated entirely by individual effort. This, when in reality, the oil industry is supported by the state of Texas in all sorts of official and unofficial capacities, with government subsidies and tax breaks.

Nevertheless, the allure of the oil prospector is a powerful one. It goes hand-in-glove with conservative ideas about the creation of personal wealth, and about the divisions of society between "makers" and "takers." These distinctions were at the forefront of media conversations about the economy in the 1980s and 1990s, and continue to the present day.

Chapter 2: The Watermelon Feed Quotes

❝ The fans clutched in their hands the 1988 Permian football yearbook, published annually by the booster club . . . It ran 224 pages, had 513 individual advertisements, and raised $20,000.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

The football yearbook is another physical example of the centrality of Permian football to the Odessa community. When the team wins, fans remember those players forever, and the yearbook is enormous with ads for businesses. Everyone likes to be associated with a winner, and local shops are immensely eager, during "boom" times for the team, to put their name next to images of the Permian Panthers being victorious on the field.

When the Panthers are less successful, however, the yearbook isn't quite so ample. Thus Bissinger notes, through his reporting of the social events associated with the team, that winning and losing can trump team loyalty even in such a football-crazy and football-loyal a community as Odessa. Although people really do love their Panthers, and love their players, they love even more the idea of being the best in the state of Texas.

❝ The standing ovation that he received at the Watermelon Feed wasn't particularly surprising. Just as he was used to football injuries, he was also used to lavish attention, as was every former Permian player who had once been ordained a star. So many people had come up to him when he was a senior that he couldn't keep track of their names . . . .

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Shawn Crow

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Shawn Crow is an old star for the Permian Panthers—not old in years, but barely a year past his prime, and therefore too old to compete on the field. Although his team was successful, Crow has seen his own future tied to the injuries he sustained on the field, which have kept him out of a successful college career up to this point. In Odessa, football is a ticket to an all-expenses-paid college education. But there is a paradox: punching that ticket, working hard to be a great player, often means forgoing the academic activities in high school that could actually prepare someone for an effective college experience.

Thus Shawn Crow is an indicator both of the adulation showered on Permian players, and of the problems that beset those players when they are no longer on the team. Shawn is a "legend," but his own life seems far more difficult and aimless after high school than it did when he was wearing a Permian jersey.

Chapter 3: Boobie Quotes

❝ My last year . . . I want to win State. You get your picture took and a lot of college people look at you. When you get old, you say, you know, I went to State in nineteen eighty-eight.

Related Characters: Boobie Miles (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Boobie is repeating what is, for the players, a common refrain: that winning the state championships would be a crowning achievement in life. Boobie says this because, it must be admitted, he wants some of the glory for himself. But the truth is, all the players for Permian want some of this personal glory—and all the players enjoy the adulation they receive from classmates when they walk through the halls. Boobie is no exception to this.

What is perhaps different, for Boobie, is the centrality of football to his life, both as a young man and as a young African American man in Odessa. For others on the team, there are lives of potential that unfold beyond the football field, as gainful employment is easily available to them after a stint in college. These opportunities are technically available to Boobie as well, but anti-black prejudice in Odessa is a powerful thing. Boobie (when he is successful) is an emblem of the team's football power, when otherwise he is rarely treated by his white classmates as a person deserving of respect. Thus, for Boobie, football success takes on other layers of importance.

❝ I won't be able to play college football, man . . . It's real important. It's all I ever wanted to do. I want to make it in the pros . . . .

Related Characters: Boobie Miles (speaker), Trapper

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This is an extension of Boobie's desires as expressed in the quotation above. For Boobie, playing in college and in the pros is a way of continuing the kind of adulation and personal affirmation he receives as a high-school player. Although these are very difficult dreams to achieve, Boobie believes—and perhaps rightfully so—that he has the talent to make it. And as above, a professional football career is one of a relatively limited set of options available to young African American men in the region.

What Boobie unfortunately does not have, and what is also required to succeed in football beyond college, is a good deal of luck, especially with injuries. Football is a brutal sport, and people are often injured so severely they cannot return to the field for months, or a year—or ever. Boobie's knee injury is serious enough to limit his explosiveness, which causes him to lose his ability to "cut" on the field. This loss means he is a less highly-touted recruit.

Chapter 4: Dreaming of Heroes Quotes

❝ After Billy died, Mike's life didn't get any easier. He had a brother who was sent to prison for stealing. At home he lived with his mother, who worked at a service station convenience store as a clerk. They didn't have much money. . . . His mother was enormously quiet and reserved, almost like a phantom. Coach Gaines, who spent almost as much time dealing with parents as he did with the players, had never met her.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Gary Gaines, Mike Winchell

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger moves on to describe the physical, emotional, and financial deprivations of another member of the Permian Panthers. For Mike Winchell, life has more or less always been difficult. Football, though it seems brutal from the stands, is actually a form of comfort to him. The game has rules that can be followed, and there is a winner and a loser. This is true for many of the Permian Panthers: the violence of the football field is nothing compared to the difficulties one encounters at home or in school.

Bissinger's description of Mike's family life indicates some other features of life in the Odessa region. There is a sense of reserve throughout the place, especially among families who have lived in rural communities for a long time—an unwillingness to complain openly about the difficulties that have wracked their lives. This then exists in contrast to the showiness of the football displays, the parades, and the booms of oil wealth. These contradictions—the quiet "grin and bear it" attitude mixed with the flash and pizzazz of a football parade—are the foundations of the Odessa

community.

❝ I've spilt more whiskey than most people have drunk . . . I wouldn't have married a couple of girls I married . . . .

Related Characters: Charlie Billingsley (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Charlie Billingsley is the great example of the hard-drinking, hard-living former football player—the person for whom life ceases to grow after high school, after the Panthers. Bissinger uses Charlie not to make fun of him, but to indicate that the pressures placed on Permian players can last throughout their lives. The experience of being a star at a very young age, and of carrying the expectations of a whole town, can take its toll.

Charlie lives a "boom-bust" life, and his personal finances are often a mess. He marries, he divorces. Life is, for him, a game not unlike football—one in which a person plays as hard as he can, only to be knocked out all at once, kept on the sidelines via injury or bad luck.

Chapter 5: Black and White Quotes

❝ It wasn't necessary to live in Odessa for long to realize that the Permian football team wasn't just a high school team but a sacrosanct white institution. "Mojo seemed to have a mystical charm to it," Hurd said.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger, Laurence Hurd (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Hurd points to an important component of the "Mojo" experience—that it is reserved primarily for white fans. This does not mean that black players can't participate and help the team. Indeed, coaches are all too happy to play whichever players will give the Panthers the best chance of winning the state tournament. But the special adulation of the "Mojo" fans is often reserved for the white stars, who are showered with praise.

Hurd is therefore acknowledging that Panthers football reflects, in a frustrating and profound way, the racial divisions of Texas (and Southern, and American) society well into the twentieth century, even after the gains of the Civil Rights era. Although everyone is permitted to play on the team—as would be legally required—the way the town treats, and celebrates, its players still falls into the same categories of racial bias.

Chapter 6: The Ambivalence of Ivory Quotes

❝ Pastor Hanson welcomed Ivory's conversion. He knew that Ivory was an influential kid whose actions made a tremendous impression on his peers. But there was something worrisome about it, and he didn't want Ivory moving from one world of isolation into another where the only difference was the level of standards.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Ivory Christian, Pastor Hanson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Pastor Hanson recognizes that Ivory's religious feeling is genuine. But he also knows that Permian football players are accustomed to all manner of "special treatment"—they are celebrities in the community. Ivory's desire to become a more active member of the church is grounded in his willingness to learn and to educate. He also sees religion as a means of orienting and directing his life outside football.

But the allure of the football team remains strong for Ivory. This isn't to say that Christian values and Permian's football culture are incompatible—indeed, many of the players pray before they play the game. But Ivory's active involvement in his church takes time away from practice and preparation on the field. Eventually, it is the pull of a possible college football career, and not religion, that will direct Ivory's life in Odessa.

❝ They would still be gladiators, the ones who were envied by everyone else . . . who got the best girls and laughed the loudest and strutted so proudly through the halls of school as if it was their own wonderful, private kingdom.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger notes here that, although the team might (occasionally) lose, the allure of Permian football is powerful enough to maintain student interest. The expectation, of course, is that the team will eventually recover, and that players will again be perceived as gods in the town. Football players will receive special treatment, special allowances for missed homework and absences from school—in short, the football machinery of Permian High will continue to chug along.

But when the team still celebrates despite not winning a particular game, what is missing is the feeling of invincibility that the squad has cultivated. Bissinger implies here that even the most successful teams will, eventually, graduate, and be forced into a world in which winning and losing are not so clearly demarcated. In these circumstances, players must cope with a new set of "rules" determining how adults behave. The envy that current students feel for current football players then turns into a much more distant respect for former players.

Chapter 8: East Versus West Quotes

❝ We know that OHS is going to be fired to the hilt and I want to match them emotion for emotion . . . It's gonna be a big crowd. It's an exciting game. I wish everybody that has an opportunity to play the gam of football all over the United States had an opportunity to play in a game like this. You're part of a select group.

Related Characters: Gary Gaines (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Gary Gaines wants to make sure his players understand the importance of the crosstown rivalry game with Odessa High. Permian has long been the football power in the community, drawing players from the generally wealthier, more developed part of town. This does not mean, however, that Odessa is entirely unable to compete, or that Permian can "sleepwalk" its way through the game and expect to win.

Gaines also notes what many of the players feel—that football season is, essentially, the emotional pinnacle of their lives, and that winning on the field does in fact mean that they have "won," at least in this portion of their lives. Gaines might understand that this is a large burden to place on the shoulders of a young person. But that does not keep him from encouraging the players to work as hard as possible to earn another victory.

❝ The Mojo mystique was purely an east-side creation, and Permian supporters would almost certainly put up a hellacious fight if they were suddenly told they had to share it with people who didn't act like them or think like them.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger underscores here just how "imagined" the community of Permian football really is. It belongs not to the entirety of Odessa but only to the wealthier east side of town—and there have been rumblings that, perhaps, Odessa High might be merged with Permian. This upsets many boosters, who feel that Permian has a special place in the area's culture, one that should not be messed with.

Of course, this "culture" is also tinged with racial politics. Permian is a largely white district. And though there are black players on the team, some of whom are stars, these players appear to fill a very particular role on the team (in the eyes of certain white players and fans). Black players, in other words, can contribute to Permian football, and help the team win, but they cannot ever be full members of the football community that is defined by the (largely white) "Mojo mystique."

Chapter 9: Friday Night Politics Quotes

❝ When Tony was Brian's age, the thought of college, any college, was as funny as it was ridiculous. Just getting through high school was miracle enough, and the way Tony and most other kids from South El Paso looked at it, everything after that in life was gravy, a gift.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Brian Chavez, Tony Chavez

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Tony, Brian's father, grew up in relative poverty near El Paso, Texas. For him, as Bissinger relates, education was something largely reserved for white families. Tony had to work extra hard merely to find for himself the opportunities that might have been readily available to—and indeed ignored by—white families living nearby. This makes Tony's rise in life and his ability to provide for Brian all the more extraordinary, coming as it does in the face of significant obstacles.

Brian is motivated by his father's experiences, and has a slightly different attitude toward the game of football than do others on the team. Brian knows, in short, that Permian football is not forever. He understands the importance of an education that moves beyond the boom-bust lifestyle of Odessa and Texas more broadly. He sees that a life of hard work might not be as glorious as a life of professional football, but it is also a dream more readily realizable and more stable.

Chapter 10: Boobie Who? Quotes

❝ For LV, watching Boobie play against Abilene had been harrowing. On every play he couldn't help but worry that his nephew would do further damage to his knee, even though the brace did provide good protection. He saw the emotional effect the injury was having on Boobie—the prolonged periods of depression as one Friday night after another just came and went.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), LV, Boobie Miles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

LV understands that football, and then the lack of football, have severe emotional effects on Boobie. Boobie was immensely successful at a very young age, and was injured according to a stroke of bad luck—there was nothing he could do to prevent the tearing of his ACL. The depression Boobie feels, severe as it is, is an indicator of what awaits, in some form,for many Permian players after their high-school football days are over. This is the boom-bust of the high-school star's career. First there is great acclaim, and the power of the "Friday Night Lights." But later there is an entire life to live, and very little direction as to how to live it.

After Boobie has been injured, LV recognizes that perhaps it was not the best policy for him, and for Boobie, to place so much emphasis on a college and pro career in football. But their gamble is an understandable one, as football provides a way out of relative poverty for so many in the Odessa community (and particularly for young black men).

Chapter 11: Sisters Quotes

❝ There is no question the banks were tantamount to prostitutes during the boom.

Related Characters: Aaron Giebel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger makes no bones about criticizing the banking and oil industries in West Texas. He believes that these industries rely on government subsidies and "handouts," then decry these same "handouts" when they are given to families in need. Bissinger also equates their business strategies to a series of institutional gambles, which cause the economic basis of the community to vary wildly, and which prevent local families from enjoying financial comfort and stability.

But Bissinger also recognizes the emotional appeal of this "boom-bust" mindset. Texas, as he traces over the course of the book, was founded by independent-minded men and women seeking opportunity in a place they believed to be untouched by the cities of the east coast of the US (although there were, of course, communities of people already living throughout the American West). For Bissinger, the opportunities and pitfalls of this boom-bust lifestyle are inseparable, and are central to the Odessa way of life.

Chapter 12: Civil War Quotes

❝ His ear had been throbbing for about two months, and it was just one of several ailments that had come up during the course of the season. He was glassy-eyed and barely able to say a word, his thoughts still fixed on what had happened on the field . . . .

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Sharon Gaines, Gary Gaines

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

In many ways, Gary Gaines has a good job—he is paid well for what he does, and his name is known throughout the community. But being the head coach of the Permian Panthers comes with an immense load of stress. Gaines is expected to win, and to win consistently. He is not given much leeway in terms of performance. He can lose on occasion, but he cannot make a habit of it—not for the boosters of the Permian team, who view success as part and parcel of the "Mojo mystique."

These pressures take their toll on Gaines. He does not complain about them openly, but his wife and family also participate in the difficulties of the football season, and they worry about Gaines' health as it is connected to the success of his players.

❝ How could he have called the plays he did? What had happened to him in the second half, going time and time again with those plodding, thudding sweeps? Didn't he remember the gorgeous bomb Winchell had thrown in the second quarter, so perfect it was like something in a dream? . . . .

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Gary Gaines, Mike Winchell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Bissinger imitates the complaints that Permian fans might lodge against Gaines when the game does not go his way. This is how coaching is difficult: fans, who do not have an immediate inroad into the team's construction and game-plan, nevertheless feel that they are part of the Permian Panthers, and therefore more than able to comment on the teams' on-field performance.

Gaines understands that these complaints, and the handling of them, are part of the job of the head coach of the "Mojo" squad. He does his best to take them in stride. But Bissinger notes just how taxing it can be to drown out the noise that some of even the most devoted fans direct at their beloved team. People love Permian football, but they love it in no small part because the team is so wildly successful so much of the time.

Chapter 13: Heads or Tails Quotes

❝ As he tried to console them, there came a sound of high school football as familiar as the cheering, as familiar as the unabashed blare of the band . . . it was the sound of teenage boys weeping uncontrollably over a segment of their lives that they knew had just ended forever.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger notes that the cruelty of the football season and its dependence on sheer luck can be understood physically in the form of the coin toss to determine playoff participants (in the case of a tied record). In this scene, Bissinger describes the many young men weeping over the fact that their "fates" have been decided by something so arbitrary. And yet the "win-lose" proposition of a coin toss is no more arbitrary than other chance-determined aspects of the football season: who has a good year, who gets hurt.

However, what is also true about these teenage boys is there lives remain ahead of them. Only in the world of Texas football would a room filled with 18-year olds also be filled with dread of the future, and the feeling that one's best years are behind them. This, Bissinger argues implicitly, is one of the most destructive attitudes of the Permian football culture.

Chapter 14: Friday Night Addiction Quotes

❝ Dear God, we're thankful for this day, we're thankful for this opportunity you've given us to display the talent that you've blessed us with. Heavenly Father, we thank you for these men and these black jersies, tank you for the ability that you've given 'em and the character that you've given 'em.

Related Characters: Gary Gaines (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Coach Gaines here argues that it is indeed a divine blessing to be able to coach for, play for, and root for the Permian Panthers. Bissinger takes this relationship between religion and football seriously. He does not wish to make fun of Gaines, who genuinely believes that it is an honor and privilege to play for Permian High. And Bissinger does not poke fun at the players and fans, for whom religion is an integral part of life, as is football. Why, Bissinger seems to ask, would these two tenants need to be separate, after all? If there is Divine Wisdom in all things, surely this wisdom would extend to football—at least in the eyes of a Permian fan or player.

Bissinger thus situates Gaines as a central authority figure in the book. Gaines is far from perfect—he puts an enormous amount of pressure on his players, for example. But he is still a man who tries his best to lead young men in an often-violent game. And he does so out of at least a partial conviction that what is good for Permian football is good for Odessa.

I'd give anything to go back out there.

Related Characters: Jerry Hix, Joe Bob Bizzell, and Daniel Justis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

This admission, on the part of older players, points to another central feature of the text: the fact that even those who have been injured by the game, or left behind when they could not transition to college or the pros, revere Permian and its football culture. The education these young men received as football players is something they carry with them. They are not spiteful, and they do not feel that football took over or ruined their lives.

Indeed, they feel quite the opposite—that their lives have been shaped for the better by a culture of winning, tradition, and physical courage instilled in them by their football coaches, and reinforced by the fans of the game. In this way, football comes to represent an entire social cod of honor and hard work that they wish to follow in their future lives, even though they can no longer play the high-school game.

Chapter 15: The Algebraic Equation Quotes

Will Bates was drummed out of Carter and reassigned to teach industrial arts in a middle school. He was given an unsatisfactory evaluation rating, placed on probation for a year, and had his salary frozen. And, of course, he was forbidden to teach and to prevent further threats to the sanctity of football.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker), Will Bates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 335

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger is perhaps most critical in this chapter of the book—critical of a competitive football culture that he believes can destroy people's lives. Will Bates has done nothing other than what he believes to be right. He has attempted to hold a football player to the same academic standard as any other student in the high school. But because football plays an outsized role in the town's self-conception—because football players are central to the total success of the school—their academic work is of little importance to most people.

Bissinger implies that the students who are supposedly "privileged" by this system when they are athletes are actually not well served once they leave school. They have been exempted from an education they deserved, in order to play a game for the delight of school administrators and fans.

Chapter 16: Field of Dreams Quotes

The season had ended, but another one had begun. People everywhere, young and old, were already dreaming of heroes.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 361

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger here identifies what he understands to be the cyclical nature of football in Texas. Every year, new players will come up - some will have promise, and some will deliver on that promise. Some will be injured, some will become stars. But then another year will turn, and the school will have a fresh opportunity to win, to go all the way to the state title game.

Bissinger notes that, while much of this is traditional and

cyclical, a great deal of it also depends on individual people's lives. A very small number of players and coaches benefit totally from the game of football. Very many more have frustrated relationships with the game and its culture, one that can cause them a lifetime of injury, or that can keep them from getting a useful high-school education.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ The Permian Panthers ended the decade exactly the same way they had begun it. Two days before Christmas, they became the state football champions of Texas.

Related Characters: Buzz Bissinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 381

Explanation and Analysis

Bissinger ends the book by noting that Permian, despite high turnover among the players, can win games, and can do so effectively over long periods of time. For Texas football playes, The state title remains the single most important athletic achievement a person, and a team, can earn. There is nothing more to be gained at this level. It is, as Boobie says earlier, a thing one tells one's children and grandchildren about.

But Bissinger's tone, in this epilogue, is far from uniformly positive and supportive. He is happy to know that many of these young men are happy. But he is at best ambivalent about the sacrifices they, their families, and their communities must make to support the churning machine of Permian football. And it is a machine, for better and for worse, that shows no signs of stopping.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The book begins "in medias res," or in the middle of the action. It is the 1988 high-school football season in Odessa, Texas, the western part of the state. The high school powerhouse there is Permian, whose Panthers have a strong team for the 1988 season and hope to make the state tournament. The book begins as Boobie Miles, a running back for Permian, thinks about his previous game against Cooper High, and worries how his previously injured knee will hold up against Midland Lee, Permian's biggest football rival.

In many ways, Boobie is the central character of the book, not because he turns out to be the most athletically successful, nor the most charming—but because the difficulties of his life and season are, for Bissinger, emblematic of the struggle of life in West Texas. What happens to Boobie's knee seems terribly unfair, especially since he has come from disadvantaged circumstances to make the Panthers squad.

The narrator—the author, Buzz Bissinger—repeats that Boobie "feels good" as he goes through the preparations before the Midland Lee game. He can barely concentrate in class—something common among football players at Permian during the season—and even the scheduled Friday pep rally can't hold his attention. Boobie is focused on playing well, regaining his earlier form—from before his knee injury—and he hopes to impress whatever college scouts might be at the game. Boobie, like many Permian players, hopes to earn a full scholarship to play Division 1 football in college.

Bissinger, in this passage and throughout the book, will employ something like a "free indirect style," where he tracks the thoughts of characters without having exact access to their thoughts. Bissinger interviews characters and takes notes on their activities in order to gain a sense of how they viewed events in hindsight; Bissinger then combines these notes to re-construct what passed through players' minds during games.

Bissinger shifts his attention to Jerrod McDougal, a defensive utility player on the team, who, before the game, slips into his Chevy pickup truck—painted **black** like Permian's school color. Jerrod listens to Bon Jovi and tries to put football at the center of his mind; he tries not to think about what comes after the football season—perhaps a job in the oil industry of West Texas, like his father—since he believes that, in-season, there can be nothing more important than Permian Panthers football. He leaves his pickup and enters the locker room, to dress for the game.

McDougal is, in many ways, representative of what Tom Wolfe might term a "good old boy," or a white, working class Southerner, largely Republican in sympathy, with racial attitudes that some might describe as unenlightened. But McDougal is also a subtle thinker and a young man deeply affected by the world around him. When Permian loses in the state tournament, at the end of the book, McDougal is more devastated than any other player.

Mike Winchell, the quarterback for the team, remarks to himself—as Bissinger reports—that he wishes he could be "knocked out" until right before the game. He finds the pregame routine excruciating, and he worries that his nerves will overcome his natural talents at the position—as they sometimes do. Winchell does fairly well in school and finds some of the academic routines pleasing, and he has considered offers to play football on the east coast, at schools like Brown and Yale, although he has no concept of what those places and universities might be like. Winchell tries to tamp down his nerves as the Permian school buses make their way, "like a presidential motorcade," to the enormous Permian High stadium in Odessa.

Schools on the east coast—especially of the Ivy League—form a kind of mythically "other" place for many players on the Permian squad, including Winchell and Brian Chavez, who will go on to attend Harvard as a student. Odessa is geographically distant from the east coast, but perhaps more to the point, it is culturally distant, too. As Presidential candidate George Bush points out, in a visit to Midland later in the book, the east is associated with "liberalism," whereas in Texas, "traditional values" reign supreme—values aligned often with the Republican party's.

Ivory Christian, a talented linebacker for Permian, "prepares" for the game by vomiting in the locker room. He does this, out of nervousness, before every game, and the other players take comfort in his vomiting, since it means that preparations are all going to plan. Gary Gaines, coach of the Permian Panthers, calls the team in for a pep talk before the game, encouraging them to play as hard as possible, for themselves and for their teammates. Bissinger also introduces Brian Chavez, a talented defensive player who loves to hit his opponents, and who has dreams of going to Harvard—he is number one academically in his class at Permian. The Panthers prepare to take the field, to the roar of fans filling the stadium. Fans for Permian scream "MOJO," the nonsense word that has become an unofficial nickname for the Panthers, among diehard fans.

Gary Gaines' pep talks, which recur in the book, often take the form of prayers—and they typically thank God, for endowing the Panthers with great "talents" and "abilities." These speeches are designed, on the one hand, to make the Panthers feel good about how strong and fast they are. And, on the other, they are embodiments of the Christian faith that is so prevalent in Odessa. Citizens there tend to feel that their community, their football, and their Christianity are all of a piece, each an embodiment of the moral toughness and character of the region.

The game begins. Midland Lee's fans are just as loud and excited as Permian's, and they love their team with the same fervor. Odessa and Midland are "sister cities," located close to each other in West Texas; both are oil towns, and their football rivalry is deep and often contentious. Lee is a "twenty-one point underdog" in the game, but despite this, the early score is close, with both teams trading touchdowns early. A talented running back named Chris Comer scores early for Permian, and Boobie, who is still on the bench, becomes upset that another player has stolen his position—and has performed well at it. At halftime, Permian is up 21-16, and Boobie, angry at sitting on the bench, says that he is quitting the team—during the game.

Chris Comer is a foil for Boobie Miles—he, like Boobie, is African American, and his successes as a junior mirror Boobie's same successes a year before. But Comer seems less concerned with his individual achievements and his "star status" than Boobie was, and next year, as Bissinger will go on to report, Comer and his teammates will win a state title—something that eludes Boobie and the other members of the '88 squad. The reader gains very little access to Comer's thoughts, and mostly hears of his performance on the field, through Bissinger.

Nate Hearne, an African American assistant coach for the Panthers, tries to convince Boobie, who is also black, to remain on the team, for his teammates. The other coaches, who are white, recognize Boobie's gifts, but believe he is tentative after his knee injury, unable to cut and juke as he once could. The white coaches also feel that Boobie cares only about his own fame, and not about the success of the team. Hearne convinces Boobie to sit on the bench for the remainder of the game; Boobie does this grudgingly. The Panthers head back to the field for the third quarter.

Boobie's supposed selfishness will be a touchstone for the book—although Bissinger seems less inclined than others—fans and coaches—to believe that Boobie is truly an egomaniac. Instead, like Hearnes, Bissinger feels that Boobie has been born into unenviable and impoverished circumstances, and that his success on the field, and his intractability as a student and player, derive in part from the instability of his family life for many years. The racial dynamic in which it is the white coaches who particularly question Boobie's grit and determination is also worth noting. For Boobie, also, football stardom was what he saw as his one route to success.

Midland Lee scores again, going up 22-21, and though Permian mounts several drives to retake the lead, Winchell cannot manage to lead the team back into the end zone. Permian loses the October game 22-21, and people in Odessa worry that, now, Permian's record will not be strong enough to make the playoffs—one of the goals of the season for a team considered one of Permian's most talented in history. People in town increase their calls for Gaines to be fired; they believe he is not "strong enough" for the job of Permian head coach. The Permian players are dejected after losing a game they feel has slipped through their fingers.

Gaines' lack of strength is another refrain spoken by the fans throughout the '88 season. But it is not clear what "strength" would be by comparison, since Gaines works his players hard, demanding that they practice, frequently, twice a day. John Wilkins, Gaines' predecessor as coach of the Panthers, was a more grim, less outspoken man, and perhaps the fans confuse this grimness with a greater intensity in coaching, although this is by no means apparent or provable.

CHAPTER 1: ODESSA

Bissinger shifts to the August of 1988, the start of the 1988 Permian Panthers football season. Fifty-five players gather early one morning in the locker room, and Coach Gaines praises them for even making the team in the first place: competition to make varsity at Permian is stiff. For Gaines, the team, and the town, the goal for the season is to make, and win, the Texas State High School Football Tournament: "Goin' to State in '88."

The entire town tends to get behind the team each year, and the goal, regardless of the talent level of the squad, is always the same—go to, and win, the state championships. This year, the expectations are especially high, since word has gotten out that the Panthers are very talented, filled with players who might be able to "make it" at the collegiate athletic level.

Bissinger steps back, to tell a brief history of the town of Odessa, where Permian is located. Odessa, in West Texas, was originally marketed by real-estate hucksters from Zanesville, Ohio, in the 1880s, as a place easterners could move to—one with good soil and ample opportunity for riches. In truth, however, the soil in Odessa was poor, and a small town there scratched out an existence with ranching and other "cowboy" businesses. Ranchers gave the town a rough-and-tumble reputation, often at odds with the Methodists who had also moved to Odessa as part of the 1880s real-estate rush to the area.

Odessa's reputation as a rough and tumble cowboy town never really dissipates, and people in the town are very quick to point to this heritage as a way of explaining what makes Odessa unique—different, for example, from the more urbane and pretentious character of Midland. Odessa's cowboy streak becomes directly embodied in the football culture, which praises toughness and teamwork above individual stats or star-power.

Odessa developed a reputation as a violent, murder-filled town of around 1,000 people, mostly ranchers—until the 1920s, when oil was discovered in the "Permian basin," a geologic formation in West Texas. Bissinger remarks that, when oil was found, the original claims of the Ohio real estate hucksters—that Odessa would become a boomtown—came true. Bissinger relates that, from the 1920s to the 1980s, Odessa was a town of booms and busts, riding high when oil prices were high, and cratering when the prices cratered.

The boom-bust cycle is also built into Odessa's history from the very beginning. Indeed, the town is founded by men looking to make a quick buck by convincing other easterners to come to a region they know to be dusty, difficult to live in, hard to grow crops in. As Bissinger notes, Odessans view with pride their ability to live in a place with so few natural amenities and conveniences, and with weather often characterized by harsh storms.

Despite the oil industry and an influx of money into Odessa following the '20s, the town retains its violent streak, its difficult weather (sand- and thunderstorms), and its stark geography. A mall and other suburban amenities were built to the east of downtown in the 1980s, and though many residents half-jokingly call Odessa "hell on earth," some are proud to have made a life there, in a place so seemingly inhospitable, with so little natural beauty or comfort.

Bissinger frequently links the suburban, mall-like, east side of town with Permian itself, which is located in the eastern part of Odessa and which draws from the largely white community there. Odessa, on the other hand, retains the small-business, mom-and-pop quality of the downtown area, which does not experience the same development boom as the eastern part of town.

Bissinger describes some of the characteristics that make Odessa a complex place. Like many other small communities in the US, Odessa has a conservative, libertarian streak—many people in the 1980s are staunch supporters of Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party. But people tend also to believe in helping their neighbors—an old rancher custom, designed to make living in a desolate and difficult place more comfortable. The town is filled with traditions, but those traditions typically apply mainly to the white, middle-class Christian communities that sprouted up following the initial oil boom. Other parts of Odessa, including Latino and African American communities, are kept away from the downtown and eastern suburbs, and their relationship to Permian High and football in the region is less obvious, less direct—since Permian retains a reputation as being a "white" school.

Odessa's conservatism, as Bissinger points out, is difficult to explain fully. In fact, Odessa might even benefit from government intervention into the price of oil, for example, which would even out some of the booms and busts of the oil industry and make life in the region more predictable and manageable. But many in Odessa find in the Republican Party the virtues of self-reliance and independence that are reflected in the "cowboy" nature of the town itself. White Odessans also tend (unfairly, as Bissinger notes) to view "outsiders," including Latinos and African Americans, as populations demanding more from the government—values which go against the self-reliance they believe is truly "Texan."

CHAPTER 2: THE WATERMELON FEED

Bissinger describes the "Watermelon Feed," an annual August event that officially kicks off the Permian season. Hundreds of fans show up at the high school, dressed in **black** Permian gear, to buy the official football yearbook and get a chance to meet the players on this year's team. Bissinger talks to fans in attendance, who claim that this team is especially talented, and deserving of a state championship.

The Watermelon Feed begins a series of ceremonial activities, designed to ramp up excitement for the team. Bissinger's description of the event—at which most of the town is present—seems hard to believe, but he goes on to show that the cafeteria is entirely full, even to overflowing, with fans and well-wishers. High School Football holds a central place in the town.

Bissinger describes an incident earlier in the eighties, which some Permian fans still grumble about. Ross Perot, then appointed as a special educational adviser to the governor of Texas, used Odessa as an example of a "football crazy" community, one that spends millions on a new stadium but reserves little money for academic improvements to the school. Permian supporters argue that football is central to the town's identity, that it brings people together, and that no one, not even Ross Perot, should be able to tell Permian High how to spend its money, so long as Permian meets certain state minimums for academic performance—which it often does just barely.

Here, Bissinger traces a strange moment in West Texas political history, wherein Ross Perot, typically viewed as a beloved son of Texas and the South generally, "turns against" his community, and argues that football takes up too much space in the public consciousness. Bissinger thus demonstrates that football in the region is not without its detractors—although the response among Permian fans is usually to discredit, immediately, anyone who claims the fan base is too enthusiastic and single-minded in its support of the team.

Bissinger then describes the Pepettes, the official cheer squad for the Permian Panthers, who are also in attendance at the Watermelon Feed. The Pepettes don't just cheer for the Panthers on the field; they also make special signs for their assigned players, and give little gifts to the players during the week, to boost their morale. Although attempts have been made recently to make the requirement for the Pepettes a little less demanding—namely, that gifts no longer have to be delivered to players' homes—the Pepettes are still eager to demonstrate their devotion to the team and to Permian High.

The gender politics of Permian High are thus laid out: Bissinger seems to question, subtly, whether it is reasonable for young women to devote themselves so obviously to a given player on the football team. But the Pepettes run deep in the town, nearly as deep as the football team—Bissinger notes, throughout the book, that several mothers of current players were themselves Pepettes when they were in high school.

Bissinger describes former player Shawn Crow, who is in attendance at the Feed. Crow is considered a hero for his comeback performance at running back in the 1987 season. Crow helped score the touchdown that allowed Permian to advance to the state semis, where they eventually lost to Plano. Crow played the game with a herniated disc, which caused him to miss his first season at TCU, where he was admitted. Although the Permian coaches thought Crow was just "whimpering" about his serious injury during the 1987 season, they now praise his sacrifice. Crow seems to accept his injuries as a part of football.

Crow's injuries from football will follow him for the rest of his life, as Bissinger here, and elsewhere, implies. Although Bissinger spends relatively little time describing the long-term health effects of playing football, he nevertheless insinuates that playing football damages players' bodies, and even brains. This anecdote also shows how the pressure to win affects both coaches views of their players and affects the choices that players make about putting their bodies in danger, even at their young age in high school.

At the Feed, the 1988 Permian Panthers, almost all seniors, are introduced, to shouts of MOJO in the crowd. Although some players, like Winchell, seem uncomfortable in the spotlight of the Feed, others, like Boobie, soak in the applause of the fans. Boobie seems excited to pick up at running back where Crow left off the year before. Boobie vows, to himself and the team, that he will perform like a star for Permian this season.

For Boobie, there can be no event more exciting than the Watermelon Feed, which is designed to direct attention toward the players. But Boobie seems to want even more attention than he is given—and he believes he deserves it, based on his performance on the field last year. At this point in the book, the Permian fans, too, are excited about Boobie's potential for the '88 season.

CHAPTER 3: BOOBIE

Boobie prepares for the first scrimmage of the '88 season, two days after the Watermelon Feed. Bissinger flashes back to the '87 campaign, when Boobie was a junior, and some of the major Texas college programs already expressed interest in him. Boobie is an agile, quick, explosive runner, and many on the team, including Winchell and Jerrod McDougal, say he's "the best player they've ever seen." Boobie's uncle, LV, acts as Boobie's father figure and mentor, and is deeply invested in Boobie's success on the field—believing that Boobie has the talent to become a Heisman Trophy candidate once he reaches a major college program.

Part of what makes Boobie's fall, from starter to practice squad, so difficult is the almost poetic height of football efficiency he was capable of when healthy. As these testimonies of fellow players indicate, Boobie was as good as any young running back they'd ever encountered. But once Boobie is "of no use" to the squad, after his injury, very few are willing to talk about how good he was. The philosophy of Permian is, simply, "next man up": whoever can fill in, will.

During the first scrimmage of '88, however, against a high school called Palo Duro, Boobie gets his toe caught in the artificial turf, and a Palo Duro player falls on his leg, injuring Boobie's knee. Boobie goes to the sideline, and trainers fear he has at best a strained ligament, and perhaps a torn one—an injury than can result in, at minimum, 6-8 weeks on injured reserve, and perhaps the loss of a season, if the injury is a full tear. Boobie is terrified that this will ruin his season and keep major colleges from investing a scholarship in him. The trainers tell Boobie that he'll be OK, and that he shouldn't give up on the season yet.

Boobie wants to resist what is, essentially, a medical truth: that, if his ACL is fully torn, he will be out for the entire season. Physical therapy in the late 1980s had very little to provide when it came to rehabilitation for the ACL tear, or the time-table thereof. Although methods have since greatly improved, it was, and still is, possible that an athlete never fully recovers from an ACL tear—never recaptures the "magic" required to cut effectively on a football field.

Bissinger switches to a narrative of LV's upbringing, in Crane, Texas. LV has become invested in Boobie's football career in part because LV himself was not able to play football at Bethune High, Crane's high school for African American students. Only Crane High, the "white" school in town, had a football team. Instead, LV played basketball for Bethune and dreamed of what he might have achieved on the football field. LV lived on one side of a five-foot-high concrete wall in Crane, a literal dividing line between the **white and black** neighborhoods of that segregated city.

Like many characters in the book, LV is content to live through Boobie, whom he has adopted as his son. Charlie Billingsley does the same, with Don, and other fathers admit to having a special interest in their sons' football careers. Bissinger does not directly condemn this practice, but he does wonder, as the book goes on, whether it is healthy for the parents, and fair for the student, for so much pressure to be placed on them at a young age.

LV himself admits that he displaced his dream of a football career onto his nephew Boobie, whom he rescued from foster care in the Houston area when Boobie was five. Boobie's father, James, was abusive, and Boobie's domestic situation was difficult and dangerous for several years, before LV offered to take him in in the Southside neighborhood of Odessa—the neighborhood composed primarily of poorer African American families. Although some in Odessa, who know LV, say that he pushed Boobie too hard to excel in athletics as a young boy, LV maintains that Boobie's natural talents are so significant it would be a crime to waste them. LV also believes that sports have given Boobie a sense of purpose in life, after a difficult childhood.

LV's interest, as Bissinger depicts them, seem to be good-intentioned, even if he occasionally puts too much pressure on Boobie to perform on the field. But Bissinger's description of LV is a subtle one, indicating that LV, too, is probably motivated by some amount of vicarious living, since he was not permitted to play football in his segregated Texas hometown. Football, in Bissinger's hands, becomes a means for analyzing the psychological motivations of many of his characters—it is a prism through which the Odessa community can be viewed and understood. That LV's segregated high school was dubiously kept from even fielding a team also illustrates racially tinged unfairness.

Boobie, as Bissinger explains, is "classified as a learning disabled" student at Permian High. Boobie struggles in school, and though he receives some special educational attention at Permian, he finds that he has difficulty maintaining the minimum academic standard for admissions to a Division 1 football university. LV believes that Boobie will receive special dispensation, called Proposition 48, which will allow Boobie to make up credits once he gets to a university—presuming that Boobie is awarded a scholarship in the first place. But Boobie's injury makes it less clear that he will have the outstanding senior season necessary to maintain the interest of football scouts in Texas.

Interestingly, although LV pushes Boobie hard on the athletic field, he does less to encourage Boobie academically, perhaps because he feels that academics will not get Boobie a scholarship, whereas athletic achievements will. But in this case, at least a minimum of academic achievement is required to get Boobie into college in the first place, and LV's scoffing at the SAT and at graduation requirements for D-1 colleges seems, at best, short-sighted.

After the Palo Duro scrimmage, Boobie is told that he only has a seriously sprained, rather than torn, ligament in his knee. Boobie believes he can return to full strength in the season, but some, like the trainer for Permian named Trapper, believe that Boobie does not have the mental toughness to work through his physical rehabilitation—and that Boobie is less concerned with helping Permian, and more concerned with his individual statistics. Bissinger notes that, once Boobie is ruled out for the first part of the '88 season, quarterback Mike Winchell realizes that a good deal of the team's offensive pressure will now fall on his shoulders.

Although characters assert throughout the book that Boobie does not care about Permian, Bissinger makes plain that Permian also seems to care very little for Boobie as a person. Rather, he is treated like a machine to help them win football games, when he is healthy—a member of the Mojo community only when he can lead the Panthers to a state championship. Boobie is said to quit on the team, but no one argues the opposite: that the team has probably quit on Boobie.

CHAPTER 4: DREAMING OF HEROES

Bissinger recounts in brief the life story of Mike Winchell, Permian's starting quarterback. Mike's father, Billy, died when Mike was thirteen—Billy had been injured in an oil rig accident and never recovered fully. Billy taught Mike how to play football and baseball, and was considered a demanding but loving instructor and father. Mike lived with his mother in Odessa following his father's death, and resolved to make Billy proud by performing well on the field. Mike's mother was quiet, reserved—the family was poor, and Coach Gaines, who knew most players' families, did not know Mike's at all.

After describing LV's relationship with Boobie, Bissinger switches to a description of Mike's relationship with his father. Although few people consider Mike to come from a "broken home" like Boobie's, Mike's childhood has nevertheless been a traumatic one, and the memory of his father motivates Mike on the field. Bissinger also seems to imply that his father's memory puts a certain amount of pressure on Mike, to succeed as a quarterback for his father's memory.

Mike became the Panthers' starting QB when he was a junior. He was a talented passer, but often beset by a lack of confidence, which would cause him to make costly errors during games, overthrowing receivers. But Mike performed well enough to earn the starting job again in his senior year.

Consistency remains a steady problem for Mike. Bissinger implies that an enormous amount of pressure is placed on Mike, and other players, to perform well despite incredible fan interest. It is more than is asked of most 17 year-old boys.

Bissinger then switches back to the narrative of the '88 season, describing the Panthers' first game, against El Paso Austin. Bissinger moves from Winchell to a running back named Don Billingsley, whose father Charlie sits in the stands, watching his son play.

Another father-son pair. Bissinger clearly has a theory about football in Odessa: that it is a rite passed down from father to son—in both its positive and negative qualities, its insistence on teamwork and its claim that nothing is more important than athletic achievement.

Charlie Billingsley was a notable running back for Permian in the 1960s, where he was also a rough-housing drinker off the field. Charlie's off-field antics were typically tolerated, because his production on the field never wavered. He was recruited by, and played for, Texas A&M for several years, but did not quite crack the starting rotation, and so transferred to a small college in Durant, Oklahoma, before finally leaving university without taking a degree. After football, Charlie lived a life characterized by continual fighting and heavy drinking, serial marriages, and several jobs held consecutively, without any one turning into a stable career. His son Don was raised by his mother, one of Charlie's wives, in Oklahoma, away from Charlie, but Don decided to move back with his father in high school, to play for Permian.

Charlie, like Don, has a mean streak, and serves as an emblem, for Bissinger, of the kind of life that football playing occasionally encourages. As Bissinger notes, football players are treated like gods in the school—they can do no wrong, and often their bad behavior is excused so long as they are performing on the field. Both Charlie and Don have been beneficiaries of this kind of treatment, and it is not clear that it serves them well in the long haul. Because, of course, after football season is over, one is no longer a player for Permian—and is no longer afforded the kinds of protections players receive. And yet having such privileges can warp one's development, can make a person feel like he deserves those privileges, like he can do whatever he wants.

Charlie, watching the El Paso game from the stands, comments that he is perhaps living through his son, "and that's pretty special." But on the field, Don has trouble "holding onto the football"; he fumbles several times in the game, and though Permian winds up defeating El Paso in a shutout, Don is taken out and replaced with an African American player, Chris Comer, a junior. Comer has several impressive runs, piquing the coaches' interest, especially after the devastating knee injury Boobie has suffered. Don tells Bissinger after the game that he is frustrated another black player has taken "his" job at running back, using a racial slur to describe Comer and Boobie—a word that is all too common among white players and coaches at Permian, even in casual usage.

Fumbling is an almost inexcusable problem for football players generally, and Don has very little justification for why it is difficult for him not to fumble the ball. Don's play in this game sets the stage for Comer's move into the starting position, which ultimately helps the Permian Panthers to make a charge into the state tournament. Note the way that Don considers the running back position to be his on almost racial grounds, that he thinks black players who take starting roles are "stealing" them for white players. The racial dynamics of the town are evident also in the views of the football players.

CHAPTER 5: BLACK AND WHITE

Bissinger traces the racial history of Odessa, which since its founding has been effectively segregated into white, African American, and Latino communities. Many white residents, Bissinger writes, use the "n-word" casually, without concern for its offensiveness. Though there are some in the town—including Lanita Akins, one of the few prominent Democrats in the city, and a secretary at a petrochemical company in town—who argue passionately against this discriminatory culture in Odessa, most believe that, in fact, the forced federal integration of Odessa's schools, in the early 1980s, made race relations more difficult, and "brought down" the level of Permian High's academic achievement. However, there is no evidence to support this claim.

Odessa is almost, but not entirely, politically uniform. Many of the political representatives for the area are Republicans, in line with the ideals of Reagan and George H. W. Bush. But there is some opposition to these policies, especially in communities that feel marginalized by the national political conversation of the 1980s. For Latino and African American families in Odessa, there is often a feeling that "American" values are synonymous with white values, rather than encompassing the many different identities that make the country what it is.

Bissinger also traces some of the historical causes of ethnic distrust in the region. One man, Willie Hammond, Jr, was the first "black city councilman" and "the first black county commissioner" in the area. Akins (whose ethnicity Bissinger does not specify), when interviewed by Bissinger, describes how shocked she was, in the 1970s, to discover that Hammond had been arrested for "arson conspiracy," in a plot to burn an old building and convert it into a civic center. Akins did not believe Hammond, who was esteemed in the community, was capable of such an act, and when Hammond admitted to guilt and was sentenced to prison, Akins and other supporters wondered about the state of black leadership in Odessa.

Many in Odessa's African American community have a hard time believing that Hammond—who was considered by many to be a paragon of virtue—would stoop to criminality in order to further his agenda as a city councilmember. Hammond's decision is difficult for the Southside of Odessa, and gives fuel to opponents of that very same community, largely on the east side—since Hammond's behavior becomes, for Odessa's whites, emblematic of a supposed "lawlessness" among minority communities in the region.

Another prominent African American leader in Odessa, a reverend named Laurence Hurd, was also arrested and convicted in the early 1980s, for burglary. Hurd spoke passionately for the rights of African Americans in Odessa, who long had been confined, officially and unofficially, to the part of town below the railroad tracks, called the Southside. Hurd argued that the town segregationist principles crippled the black community at the expense of the white—and that this distinction was evident in the quality of schools and other services on either side of the railroad. But Hurd, as Bissinger reports, is in prison by the late 1980s, serving his burglary sentence, and the town has no visible "black role models."

What's most difficult about Hurd's eventual downfall is the cogency and influence of his arguments among engaged citizens in the Southside. Hurd is a forceful advocate for educational and social equality for black families in Odessa, and his imprisonment, like Hammond's, only sets back the cause for which Hurd has spent a large portion of his life fighting.

Bissinger notes that racial inequality was most apparent through comparisons of he three schools in Ector County: Odessa High (the town's first high school), Permian, and Ector High. Odessa was 93 percent white, Permian 99 percent, and Ector 90 percent minority. Forced federal integration in the early '80s led to the closure of Ector—because white residents in Odessa were unwilling to allow Permian students to be shifted to other schools, since they feared this would destroy the Panthers' vaunted football culture.

Bissinger uses Permian as a case study in how well-intentioned desegregation efforts, on the federal level, can go wrong, especially when white families of influence in communities oppose exactly the measures that are intended to help level the educational playing field. Permian, even after desegregation in the 1980s, maintains its reputation as a largely "white" school, because it is located in a part of town that is, and remains, dominated by middle-class white families.

Hurd, as Bissinger reports (presumably having interviewed Hurd in prison in 1988) came to Odessa from New Mexico, where he had also encountered entrenched, institutional racism. During the football season of 1980, when Permian high won the state championship with a group of plucky, but relatively untalented, players—much to the delight and acclaim of white Odessans—Hurd led a movement on the Southside, to generate more attention toward a proposed federal desegregation of Odessa schools. Although Hurd's plan was successful in pushing the issue, it resulted, however, in the closing of Ector High, the largely minority school. Federal officials believed this method "most efficient" in relieving segregation in the area, because Ector High was small, and its students could be sent either to Odessa or to Permian.

One of the starkest passages in the book, this section describes the Permian football culture—white and middle-class—on the one hand, and the struggle for civil rights happening in the African American community of Odessa, mere miles away. Hurd's speeches galvanize the community and help attract the attention of federal regulators, who agree to ramp up efforts to officially and finally desegregate Odessa's public high schools. Unfortunately, these efforts backfire, and result in the closing of Ector High, and the division of the African American community between the Permian and Odessa High Schools.

Bissinger notes, then, that a war of "gerrymandering" broke out, in the mid-1980s, where officials decided which parts of the Southside to send to Permian, and which to Odessa High. Despite the fact that Permian was, and remained, a largely white school, catering to the wealth and, mostly white east side of Odessa, large parts of the African American section of the Southside were also sent to Permian, since Permian officials believed these area rich in football talent. The rest of the Southside, largely Latino, went to Odessa High—Latino recruits were less highly praised as gifted by Permian's coaches.

Although Bissinger does not explain directly why Latino players are perceived to be less talented than others on the football field, he does indicate that these cultural perceptions are merely that—perceptions, rather than observations grounded in fact. If anything, Bissinger takes pains to indicate that Permian's football culture is a construct, something that can change if enough players, coaches, and fans want it to—for example, Brian Chavez, whose family is Latino, becomes a key contributor to Mojo football.

Bissinger closes the chapter by asking Hurd about his thoughts on football. Although Hurd believes football can be a source of good in a community, he also notes that the Permian football team is still mostly white, and that though some black players become star players, they are most important to Permian because they are good at sports—not because they are treated as equal members of the school community. Hurd states that black students in Odessa are made to believe that one of the only ways to a college degree is through athletics—a difficult standard that is not so stark in white communities, where good academics are also a route to college. Hurd rues the fact that, because he is in prison for a robbery committed out of rashness, his voice in the community no longer has the power and influence it did earlier in the 1980s.

Bissinger also describes a frustrating academic and racial divide, which stems from attitudes toward ethnicity and athleticism in the region. A talented white football player can, of course, earn a scholarship to play at the collegiate level, and so can a talented black player. But for white students, there is also the socially-esteemed option of getting good grades, and perhaps working hard at extracurricular activities, in order to gain admission to a competitive school. These options are technically open to African American and Latino students, too, but they are not emphasized within the institution of Permian itself—leading to the notion that people of color must gain athletic scholarships to go to college (and perhaps explaining why being a star and getting a scholarship is so important to Boobie Miles).

CHAPTER 6: THE AMBIVALENCE OF IVORY

Bissinger moves on to tell the story of Ivory Christian, an immensely talented black player, a middle linebacker, whose ability on the football field is matched by his passions off the field—and by his resentment toward football, even as he enjoys hitting people and playing the game. Indeed, Ivory has difficulty integrating different aspects of his life: his desire for physical contact, his anxiety about football games that causes him to throw up before a contest, and his interest in preaching the Gospel, which he begins to do increasingly as he moves through high school.

Ivory's relationship to the game of football is, as Bissinger describes it, truly ambivalent. The game appeals to him as a bodily experience, as it does for others on the team—McDougal and Chavez, among others. But the violence of the sport, and its emphasis on "putting the hurt" on other players, is very much at odds with the sermons of peace Christian preaches on Sundays. Christian has understandable difficulty reconciling these seemingly opposite sets of values.

Christian begins preaching some Sundays at a church in town, and gives up on alcohol and partying, even going so far as to chastise some of his fellow players for talking dirtily or drinking on the weekend. His mentor at the church, Pastor Hanson, tells Christian that not everyone will live up to the high religious example that he sets. But Christian feels that preaching is his true calling, and that, after football season, he will devote himself more fully to the church. Christian even resolves, briefly, to quit the team midseason, although Hanson talks him out of this decision, arguing that there is space enough in Christian's life for God and for football.

Hanson, in this case, does Christian a favor, aiding him in his quest for a college scholarship. But perhaps Hanson also encourages Christian to continue playing football because he wants Christian to succeed on the field. Bissinger does not state this directly, but nearly everyone in Odessa has some relationship to the success of Permian football, however tenuous, and Bissinger notes, in other instances, that even ambivalent supporters of the program want great players on the team, competing for the state title.

Bissinger switches to a description of Permian's second game of the '88 season, for which Christian prepares very seriously, against the Marshall Mavericks who are from the eastern part of the state, hundreds of miles away. Marshall is one of the top high school programs in Texas, and though the game is non-league—and therefore does not effect Permian's standings in the state playoffs—the game does determine bragging rights between two football-mad schools. Permian charters a jet, for 20,000 dollars, to send its players east for the game, and the Panthers read up on Odell Beckham, the star running back for Marshall, whom Christian is in charge of stopping.

Apparently, Permian's chartering of a jet to attend a non-conference game is standard for this region and time period—even though, as teachers later note, the budget for some academic programs is miniscule in comparison to that of football. In these instances, Bissinger plays up the apparent hypocrisy of school administrators who argue, on the one hand, that they must improve academics in the region, and who sign off, on the other, on enormous expenditures designed to increase the football team's profile, at the direct expense of the educational program.

Christian covers Odell Beckham effectively throughout the game, and at the half the Panthers are in the lead, 7-3. After halftime, some of the players become sick from their physical effort in the intense heat of the day. The game stays close, then Marshall goes up, 13-12, with only one possession left for Permian. Winchell leads his team up the field, but is unable to convert near the end zone, and Permian loses the game. Marshall fans erupt in celebration, and the Panthers are devastated on the hot, dry field.

Winchell's inability to score in crunch-time situations becomes an unfortunate refrain throughout the book. Bissinger implies that Winchell is a very talented quarterback, but that something in him balks or flinches when the chips are down—Bissinger notes that perhaps this diffidence stems from the difficulty of Winchell's home life as a child.

Back in Odessa, some of the residents of the town begin calling more loudly for Coach Gaines' firing, since the Panthers are 1-1: the first time they've had a .500 record in years. Although the game with Marshall was non-league, and therefore doesn't effect the Panthers' playoff chances, many in town are stunned that Permian, which is known to be especially talented this year, is struggling on the field, or at least apparently so. Bissinger briefly describes a party back in Odessa, the weekend of the Marshall loss, in which some of the football players and their friends get into a fight, perhaps out of frustration with the team's mediocre performance so far in the season.

Bissinger notes that drinking among football players is tolerated more or less openly, as simply a part of the "boys will be boys" culture linked to football. Although Bissinger does not dwell too long on scenes of drinking and fighting among the players, he strongly implies that these events occur constantly throughout the season—and that authorities do nothing to stop them, perhaps even tacitly condone them.

CHAPTER 7: SCHOOL DAYS

Bissinger describes the next pep rally, after the Marshall game, where the Pepettes, the Panthers, and the Permian fans seem to have recovered their spirits after the loss the previous week. Bissinger then follows Don Billingsley through a day of school, in which Don goes to food science class, watches a movie in sociology, showing the "investigative reporting" of the newscaster Geraldo Rivera, and generally does very little work—a typical football player's schedule at Permian. Don states that his job, during football season, is to play, and school is merely something he has to do in order to be on the field.

Bissinger makes no bones about describing many of the course offerings at Permian as, effectively, jokes, classes that football players can pass easily, in order to maintain GPAs high enough to ensure their continued place on the team. Billingsley, even more than other football players, takes advantage of an easy schedule. Yet his excesses highlight what seems a fact for many of the players: that school is not as important to them, or the community they live in, as football.

Bissinger notes that SAT scores and overall grades have dipped at Permian since the 1970s. Some teachers and community members blame this drop on the new "ethnic composition" of the school, which, after federal desegregation in the early '80s, caused an influx of black and some Latino students to enter what was a mostly white school. Others, however, blame different factors: the bust in the local oil economy in the late'80s, or "the breakdown of the family unit." Teachers tell Bissinger that students seem now only to care about "having a good time," and about following Permian football.

Bissinger here notes the obvious racial biases of people in positions of authority within Permian High. Rather than admitting that the erosion of academic standards has been forced upon them, by a culture demanding the privilege of the football team above all else, teachers are content to blame the "lowered standards" on the influx of a "new population of students." Bissinger describes players, like Billingsley, who take school as a joke and are white, as a way of counteracting this bias.

Bissinger interviews some female students, who claim that schoolwork is less important than finding a boyfriend—football players are at the top of the school food chain—and planning for marriage and domestic responsibilities. Bissinger finds a couple students, including Brian Chavez (who is on the football team) who are serious about their schoolwork, but in general, football players, and many other Permian students, male and female, take easy course loads. Teachers at Permian have begun to respond to student apathy by giving up themselves—showing more videos, assigning easier homework.

Brian Chavez is, for Bissinger, a beacon of hope in the district, a student whose commitment to football is matched or even surpassed by his commitment to his studies. Bissinger later traces Chavez's goals, in part, to those of Chavez's father, Tony, who was himself the son of immigrants from Mexico, and who worked his way through law school and moved to the largely white, middle-class east side of Odessa, where his family now lives.

Bissinger follows Brian Chavez around the school, and finds that he performs well in class—he is a diligent student, polite, hardworking, and he seems less anxious than some of the other football players. Bissinger attributes this to the fact that Chavez has plans and ambitions off the football field—he still wants to attend Harvard—meaning that Chavez's performance on Friday night is not the only thing in his life. Bissinger interviews an English teacher named LaRue Moore, who argues that football has a place at Permian, but feels that the school's football culture has been greatly amplified to the detriment of other academic disciplines. She says that, recently, the English department received its first and only computer, whereas the football team has had advanced computer and video technology for years.

For Bissinger, it is not simply that Chavez wishes to attend Harvard, or even that he is an immensely talented student—although both these are true. Rather, Bissinger seems to value most Chavez's maturity, his willingness to understand that there is more to life than football, and that, in a matter of months, the dream of Friday nights will be over. Chavez sets himself apart from his teammates by refusing to believe that his life is over or will be diminished when he leaves the field. Rather, he understands that it is just beginning, once he makes his way to college.

Bissinger interviews the Ector County superintendent, Hugh Hayes, who, like LaRue Moore, argues that football has now achieved a kind of holy position in the region, meaning that very little money, time, or energy is allocated for academic pursuits in the schools. Hayes hopes to reverse this trend, but does not seem especially hopeful that much will change. Bissinger shadows Boobie one day in school, and notes that many of Boobie's classes are taken far below the level of the average high school senior. Although Boobie receives some special attention from teachers—an effort to help him academically—for the most part, Boobie is coddled and allowed to sit during the school day—so that he can be ready to play Permian football on the weekends.

Boobie's classes, even more so than Billingsley's, are a mixture of immensely easy assignments, with very little oversight. Boobie has learning difficulties, and is the beneficiary of some well-intentioned programs designed to help him navigate the curriculum. But, all too frequently, for Bissinger, Boobie is merely allowed to sit while the school day takes place around him. Bissinger considers this a double injustice, for it deprives Boobie of a meaningful education—of which he is more than capable—and it treats him only as a player, not as a student.

CHAPTER 8: EAST VERSUS WEST

For the fourth game of the season, Permian is set to play Odessa High, their crosstown rivals. Permian students hail largely from the east part of Odessa, and Odessa High students from the west. Odessa has a large Latino population, because Latinos tend to live in West Odessa. Odessa High's football tradition, though once proud, is now a shadow of its former self. Odessa has not beaten Permian in 23 years, and before the game, Coach Gaines urges the Panthers to crush Odessa, to run up the score, and to ensure that the streak continues for another year.

Coach Gaines, normally rather reserved even in pregame speeches, here lets loose, arguing perhaps for his own job—for he knows that, if Permian cannot defeat Odessa High, Gaines might very well be run out of town. Permian's dominance over Odessa is one of the bedrocks of the football community, and if Gaines were to be coach when that balance was upset, there is no telling how much it might anger the fan-base. It's also important to remember, however, that Permian is the "powerful" white school, while Odessa is a less powerful school made up of primarily minorities. While unstated, it is certainly arguable that it is not just Permian's football tradition that the Permian community sees as being at stake here, but also the traditional power and dominance of the white community in Odessa.

Bissinger traces the football history of Odessa High, which, back in 1946, before Permian opened, was itself a powerhouse. That year, Odessa High won the state title, and though it never won again, many in the region still recall that Odessa High Bronchos squad. Over the years, affluent white families began moving to the east side of town, and in 1959, Permian High opened, attracting more of the same families and assuming the football tradition Odessa High once owned. In the meantime, Odessa began attracting more and more Latino families, which, as Bissinger explains, were not quite as football-mad as white families on the Permian side of town.

As Bissinger notes, Permian's dominance in the region has not been permanent—even though, on Friday nights, it seems that way. Odessa used to carry the mantle of football throughout West Texas, and clearly, some Odessa fans hold onto the idea that, one day, the program can again rise to prominence. Bissinger seems to link this desire for a resurgence to a desire, throughout West Texas, that the oil economy, too, might recover—it is the eternal optimism necessary to guarantee that people can keep living through the difficult years.

The Odessa-Permian rivalry remains a serious one, with some businesses unwilling to choose between them (bedecking themselves in both red and **black**, to show impartiality). But Permian continues to dominate on the field. As Bissinger returns to the 1988 game, he describes the Panthers' steady progress up the field, as they dismantle Odessa over the course of four quarters, winning in an enormous blowout. Sitting with Odessa fans in the stands that night, Bissinger watches as their hope turns to bitter disappointment for another year. Although the fans are not surprised that their Bronchos have not managed to win, they never give up hope entirely, and some resolve that, perhaps, next year, things will be different, and Odessa will pull out a victory over Permian.

Permian does its job, winning over Odessa High in such convincing fashion, it seems impossible that that team could ever beat the powerhouse of the Panthers. But Odessa fans refuse to abandon there squad, and Bissinger seems to find in this a kind of comfort—a belief that, even in a world where money comes and goes, and where the oil industry booms and busts, there is something stable about the orientation of people's lives in West Texas, at least as far as football goes.

CHAPTER 9: FRIDAY NIGHT POLITICS

Bissinger sits with Brian Chavez's father, Tony, during the Panthers' next game, against Midland High (not to be confused with Midland Lee, the team to whom the Panthers will lose later in the season, as covered in the Prologue). Tony "beams with pride" as he watches his son play magnificently, hitting the Midland offensive players soundly, making tackles. Tony, as Bissinger explains, has done well for himself in Odessa, having started out from humble circumstances, then serving in the army in Germany, then returning to Texas, working in the police department, and earning a law degree. Tony is now an affluent resident of the east side of town, a real success. Yet he feels subtle prejudice against himself and his family, because he is Latino. Tony's politics—generally liberal, aligned with the Democratic party—differ significantly from the pro-Reagan stance of many in Odessa.

Tony's hard work, and his willingness to break through difficult barriers of race, as imposed by the largely white communities in which he has lived and worked, seems, to Bissinger, almost superhuman—Bissinger's reverence for Tony and his son Brian is obvious in these passages. Bissinger also seems interested especially in characters who, despite their political leanings, so different from the largely Republican values of the Odessa area, nevertheless root for the Permian squad. In this way, Bissinger argues that, at least on occasion, allegiance to football can unite, can cut across racial and political lines, at least fleetingly.

After the Midland game, which the Panthers win in a blowout shutout, George Bush visits the Odessa-Midland region, as a candidate running for President in the 1988 election—which is only several weeks away. Bush discusses how he and his wife Barbara lived in Odessa, then in Midland, early in their careers, when they were starting out in the oil business. Although Bush's family is wealthy and from Connecticut, Bush paints himself, to the cheering and excited Midland crowd, as a man of Texas, someone who believes in the oil industry, and who will increase the prosperity of places like West Texas when he becomes President.

Bissinger tries to maintain an objective stance in his discussion of Bush and his connections to West Texas, but Bissinger nevertheless makes clear that Bush, like Reagan, is as much an actor as a politician—a man who can project the "values of the people," but who is from a background of extreme wealth and privilege. Bissinger makes plain that authenticity in West Texas, and in America generally, is not a fixed construct, but is based instead on whether or not people think *you're authentic—a representative of their own interests.*

Bissinger reports on Bush's stump speech in Midland, where he decries the policies of Michael Dukakis, a "liberal from Massachusetts." Bush makes it seem that Dukakis is "soft on crime," that he doesn't care about the "common people" of places in the middle of the country, and that he does not have the courage or leadership skills to be President of the United States. Although Bissinger seems to imply that Bush's statements are unfair distortions of Dukakis actual policies and opinions, he also asserts that Bush understands places like Odessa and Midland, having lived there and gone to football games there, as Bush himself describes. Bissinger wonders aloud if Dukakis has ever been to something like a Permian football game, and what Dukakis might learn about the country by sitting in those stands.

Bissinger makes an interesting move in this section. Despite the fact that it is fairly certain Bissinger agrees more with Dukakis', rather than Bush's, economic and social policies, Bissinger nevertheless argues that Bush, rather than Dukakis, is willing to go the extra mile, to "sit in the stands" with the people of places like Odessa, in order to understand their lives. Bissinger, himself a man from the coasts who has come to Odessa to understand and write about its people, makes a case that liberal and coastal politicians should make similar efforts at connection and understanding, and that there is much in Odessa from which these politicians could learn.

CHAPTER 10: BOOBIE WHO?

Bissinger returns to Boobie Miles, who, since that first scrimmage of the season, has been rehabbing his knee injury, attempting to break back into the starting lineup. When Boobie returns after several weeks, he is assigned a **white** practice shirt, rather than a **black** starter's shirt, during the week before the Odessa Game. Trapper, the Permian trainer, and Belew, an assistant coach, are shocked when they realize that Boobie thinks he'll play against Odessa, especially since Comer, who has filled in for Boobie, has been performing so well.

The exchange of the black shirt for the white one is a symbolically heavy experience for Boobie, who feels that, despite his injury, he is still one of the most talented members of the team. The white vs. black shirt, like the white-black divisions in the town, and the starkness of the line between success and failure, is just another indication of how quickly a football career can catapult one to stardom—or result in one's being relegated to the bench.

Boobie does eventually get some playing time the following week against Abilene, a team that, in his junior year, Boobie performed extremely well against. But Boobie's numbers are mediocre—he averages only a few yards per carry coming back from his injury—and he appears "tentative" on his rehabbed knee, unable to twist and turn as convincingly as before. LV, in the stands, wonders aloud to Bissinger whether it's OK to have Boobie playing so soon after his injury, especially since the "ultimate goal" is to have Boobie play D-1 college football. But LV is convinced that Boobie is right to be back on the field, trying to compete.

It is more or less a miracle that Boobie is even playing at all, since, if the injury were even slightly more severe, Boobie would have to sit out many months, and the rehab process would be especially painful. Some coaches feel that Boobie is perhaps rushing his rehab, in order to get back on the field sooner, and others argue that, since Boobie has been "cleared" by the doctors, he should play and not complain about his knee at all. Both stances are unfair to Boobie, who wants, mostly, another shot at playing on the field, another shot at getting a scholarship.

Bissinger notes that Comer retains the starting job, and that Boobie's numbers continue to be pedestrian—an average of a couple yards per carry, no games over more than 70 or so yards. The assistant coaches and trainers, including Trapper—who appears to dislike Boobie's me-first attitude—complain that Boobie does not care about the team. They also insinuate that Boobie is somehow "weak," for favoring his rehabbed knee. Bissinger reports that, for the Permian staff, if someone is medically cleared to play, that means they're OK, no ifs, ands, or buts. But, of course, Boobie is not 100% on his knee—even if coaches refuse to acknowledge that.

The black-and-white divide is apparent here, too, in the assistant coaches' idea of being "weak" or "strong." Coaches see players as being either "injured," which means they sit on the bench and get better, or they are "OK," which means they play and do not complain. This, of course, ignores a whole set of circumstances in the middle, when players play through considerable pain, possibly risking additional or lifelong injury by doing so. Boobie occupies exactly this gray area between the two extremes, and the coaches then blame him for it.

Briefly, at the close of the chapter, Bissinger notes that Winchell has had a very strong beginning of the season, especially in the Abilene game, where he throws four touchdowns early on. But Winchell still retains that fundamental doubt in his abilities, a nervousness that, he fears, will come out during the upcoming game with Midland Lee, the game Bissinger describes in the Prologue of the book. Winchell wonders if he has the skills necessary to play QB in college, and though he is occasionally brilliant at the position, still his nerves and anxieties dog him, and he is capable of costly mistakes and interceptions on the field.

Winchell's doubt is another example of the white-and-black divide. Winchell is a great football player, very talented, and it appears that he should, quite simply, have a star season. But his anxiety causes him to play as though he were not talented—it is as though he exists in a gray area between "star" and "goat," and has trouble navigating, at any particular moment, whether he will save the day, or be responsible for Permian's demise.

CHAPTER 11: SISTERS

Bissinger describes the uneasy relationship between the cities of Odessa and Midland, only a few dozen miles apart in West Texas. Odessa, as Bissinger has said before, is a rough-and-tumble town, a cowboy town, one that doesn't stand much on ceremony. Many of the blue-collar workers associated with the West Texas oil boom live in Odessa, and work in construction, or petroleum management. The financing of the boom, though, the corporate headquarters and shining offices and banks, are in Midland, which has streets named after Ivy League schools, and a general attitude of superiority over violent, dusty Odessa.

For Bissinger, the antagonism between Midland and Odessa, as towns, mimics the antagonism between the football teams in each of those communities. It is unclear which comes first—the animosity between teams, or between towns—but certainly the one feeds into the other. Midland, as Bissinger notes, has a higher opinion of itself, perhaps because, since its inception, it has tried to incorporate touches of east-coast wealth into its town planning and self-image.

Bissinger describes the way the oil boom of the mid-'70s effected both Odessa in Midland, making businessmen believe they were invincible, and allowing even uneducated workers in Odessa to make many thousands of dollars a week. Bissinger goes on to describe the rise and fall of a man named Aaron Giebel, living in Midland, whose prosperity and collapse in the oil industry is indicative of a great many businessmen's careers. Giebel, Bissinger explains, started out a modest businessman, but soon began investing in oil prospecting, and as the price of oil rose, Giebel gambled more and more on the industry, seeing his profits continually rise through the early 1980s.

Aaron Giebel, whom Bissinger interviews and focuses on in this section, is meant to stand in for a large number of Midland and Odessa businessmen and women in this time, who, though normally quite cautious and rational in their investments, were caught up in the boom years, and felt, like gamblers, that the good times could never stop. Of course, they did stop, and much of the economy of Midland crumbled soon after. Giebel recognizes how foolhardy he had been, to get caught up in the craze. Yet there is perhaps an echo, here, too of the way the football team's use their players, going for the win on the backs of boys who might be injured, gambling with the future lives of young men who've been brought up not to care about anything other than football glory.

But the bust was inevitable—it would come, and it did. Giebel had spent enormous amounts of money on a private jet, and on his own gigantic home, only to find that he was no longer making enough money per barrel to justify his expenditures. OPEC—the oil cartel in the Middle East—was flooding the market with oil, driving the price down with demand holding steady. Bissinger notes that, in Midland, a great many reputable businesses also failed, including the First National Bank, long a bulwark in the community. Bankers there, like Giebel and other prospectors, had begun to assume that the boom would last forever—they over-leveraged, making risky loans, only to find that, when the bust came, it came swiftly. First National filed for federal bankruptcy protection, and Midlanders viewed this as a final indication, in the late 1980s, that the oil bust was real and lasting.

Bissinger notes that the fall of the bank was an almost unfathomable blow to the community. In a place where very few institutions are built to last, the banks in Midland and Odessa were similar to the football programs in that area—bastions of tradition, and sources of pride for the community. It is hard to imagine what it would mean to Odessa, for example, if Permian High were to close, or if the Panthers were no longer a dominant team. This is why a merger between Odessa and Permian High Schools is almost unthinkable to many residents—the Panthers' tradition must be maintained, for the good of the community—or so think many.

Bissinger tours a field in Midland, where large pieces of heavy machinery and other oil equipment are now stored, unused. Businesses are trying to unload this equipment, but the bust means that wells are no longer being tapped, since oil is not worth enough to make the drilling profitable. Bissinger notes that the late-'80s bust has humbled many of the businessmen and workers both in Odessa and Midland, but he wonders whether they don't just expect another boom—and whether they will speculate just as wildly when that next boom comes.

The rusting machinery, simply waiting in the field for another boom, another rush of capital into the region, is, for Bissinger, an indication of the perpetual optimism of places like West Texas, even though they know that another boom almost certainly means, eventually, another bust. For Bissinger, the fates of the oil industry and of the football teams of West Texas are similar—every fan hopes that they can win it all next year.

Bissinger transitions to the Midland Lee-Permian game, and to a pregame speech that Coach Gaines delivers just before. The speech, about an Olympic swimmer named Steve Genter, praises that man's courage in the face of a terrible injury—but Genter swims "through the pain," and Gaines demands that same toughness of his players against Midland Lee. Bissinger notes that Brian Chavez, and some of the other players, detect a real fear in Gaines' voice as he delivers his pregame speech—as though Gaines, too, worries that Permian might not be able to beat their sister-city rivals at Midland Lee.

Brian Chavez, perhaps one of the most perceptive players on the team, understands that the Midland Lee game, like the Odessa game, is crucial for the team, and even crucial for Coach Gaines, who relies on key victories to retain his job. It is unclear whether other players think much about Gaines' job security, but Chavez appears to be the kind of young man who is mature beyond his years—and recognizes the pressure that winning places on the coaching staff.

CHAPTER 12: CIVIL WAR

After the loss to Midland Lee, the players are devastated. Winchell worries that he has lost the game for his team, and Chavez and McDougal are nearly beside themselves with sadness. Sharon Gaines, Gary Gaines' wife, tries to find and console her husband after the loss. She, Gary, and their daughter Nicole know that the press and citizens of Odessa will be after their coach, for losing to Midland Lee is nearly unpardonable, especially since Permian was favored to win by a large margin.

Here, Bissinger turns to describe exactly what those family pressures are—he allows the reader a window in Coach Gaines' home life. For Bissinger, Gaines wager, as a football coach, is not dissimilar to that of a prospector. When times are good, there is nothing better than leading a winning team. But when the bust comes, as it often does, the coach is the first one to be fired.

Bissinger describes Gaines' travails during the season: his physical ailments, including an earache, and the constant pressures of coaching and trying to win in a football-crazed town. His wife and daughter understand that it is quite likely Gaines could be fired after the season, if Permian doesn't make a run deep into the playoffs. Bissinger notes that high school football coaches in Texas have a great deal of notoriety in their communities—they are better known than mayors and city council members, and paid relatively large sums by their schools. But they have very little job security.

What is perhaps more surprising is the fact that Gaines, like his players, is subject to physical ailments during the football season. Gaines' derive largely from the stress of the job, which Bissinger insinuates can be extremely intense. Gaines' wife Sharon clearly worries about her husband, but understands, too, that her and her family's social position in town derives from her husband's job—one of the most high-profile in the region.

Bissinger compares Gaines to the prior coach at Permian, John Wilkins, who is now the athletic director for the county schools. Wilkins was called "Darth Vader" by some in Odessa, for his terse, no-nonsense style. Some fear that Gaines is too kind to his players, and, unlike Wilkins, too "soft" to win the big games. Wilkins was coach of the state champion Permian team in 1980, and is still famous in town for his winning ways.

Wilkins is, in many ways, the perfect foil to Gaines. Whereas Gaines tries his best—at times—to be concerned about his players needs (so long as he can continue to win games), Wilkins makes no bones about caring about one thing, and one thing only: winning the state title. Many in the town feel that Wilkins' attitude was central to the team's success, though the unstated corollary to Wilkins' focus is that he cared more about the state title than about the wellbeing of his players. The success of Friday Night Lights is to see both the glory in this – how focus and belief can mold a team that is stronger than its parts and lead to victory – and tragedy, in that young men are giving up their bodies and educations to willingly serve a town's desire for victory in a game.

Bissinger ends the chapter by following Jerrod McDougal and his father and mother. McDougal is mature for a high-schooler—he knows that football and oil are king in West Texas, and that there's little he can do to change that. Bissinger describes McDougal as a determined player, happy to be a part of Odessa's football culture, and a proud American patriot, in the cowboy mold of West Texas: guns, hunting, beer, and his beloved pickup truck. But Bissinger takes pains to show that Jerrod thinks closely about his place on the team, in Odessa, and in the world at large. He understands that Odessans' love of football sets them apart from other parts of the country, and though he is proud of where he's from, he acknowledges that there is a whole wide world beyond Texas, a world he might never see or learn about firsthand.

An intriguing section of the book. Here, Bissinger delves more deeply into Jerrod's psyche, and finds that McDougal thinks a great deal about the world around him, even if it's a world he has not seen. McDougal knows that oil and football are all West Texas has, yet he does not blame these things, nor does he feel that his life has been hampered in any way by its focus on the Permian team. Rather, McDougal wonders, genuinely, what more life has to offer, and whether anything else can live up to the thrill of football. Like others in Odessa, McDougal is a kind of gambler, and the enjoyment of being on the field is a powerful, if fleeting, intoxicant that he wants to experience for as long as possible.

CHAPTER 13: HEADS OR TAILS

In a short chapter, Bissinger describes the end of the Panthers' regular season. Permian beats San Angelo to achieve a 7-2 record, finishing in a threeway tie in their division with Midland Lee and Midland High. Only two of the teams can go to the state playoffs. The tiebreaker provision in Texas high school football calls for a decision by coin toss, to be held the night after the final games of the season. After Permian defeats San Angelo, Bissinger rides with Coach Gaines and Assistant Coach Belew to a small gas station diner in the middle of the empty country near Midland—an "undisclosed" location for the toss, with the coaches of Midland Lee and Midland High. But news vans are alerted to the toss's location, and show up to broadcast the toss live, at midnight the last Friday of the season.

Although it is perhaps hard to believe, there is no official tiebreaker—for example, points against, or records over mutual foes. Instead, the teams must submit themselves to total chance, a coin flip. Here, Bissinger implies that, once again, there is an element of gambling, and inherent unfairness or irrationality, in West Texas' obsession with football.

On the ride to the toss, Gaines and Belew talk about their youth and about football in almost romantic terms. But this comes to an end when they reach the toss, and when Gaines realizes that the whole season, and his job, will come down to an event over which he has no control. A referee tells the three head coaches the rules: simple odd-man-out, so whoever throws something different from the other two coaches will see his team out of the playoffs. Gaines and the Midland Lee coach each throw heads, and Midland High's coach throws tails. At Midland Lee and Permian, the players watching live on TV celebrate wildly, knowing they are off to the playoffs. The Midland High players, as Bissinger remarks, understand that "segment of their lives is now over forever." Gaines remarks aloud that the toss seems an especially cruel way to determine a team's fate.

What is perhaps most unfair, here, is not that the coach might be kept from the playoffs, but that the players on Midland High—those who have sacrificed their fall, and much of their young lives, for the dream of a trip to "state"—will have to live with the fact that a coin flip kept them out of the playoffs. Bissinger here wonders, most directly, whether all this football, all this competition, is useful or productive for young men, who have been taught to neglect everything else, including their studies, for a dream that can evaporate quickly, and leave nothing but sadness behind. Note also that Gaines likely keeps his job because of the outcome of that coin flip.

Bissinger describes Boobie's remainder of the season. After the last regular-season game, Boobie officially quits the team—he says he wants to be able to rehab his knee fully, and get surgery to repair a part of the ligament. But others on the team, who believe Boobie is a quitter, assert that Boobie has left because he is no longer the star. Many of the white assistant coaches compare Boobie to a "lame horse," who needs to be "shot" because he can no longer perform. The stress of leaving the team causes Boobie to fight with his uncle LV, and to leave the house to go off and live elsewhere in Odessa. LV is upset at how things have transpired with his nephew and adopted son, but he still believes that Boobie can heal his knee and make a career for himself in college football.

A scene of shocking heartlessness, on the part of some of the Permian Panthers' coaches. Here, they treat Boobie in explicitly racist terms, arguing that he is no better than an animal, and that, like an animal, he should be "shot" when he can no longer "perform" on the field. Although one might argue that the coaches would talk of any player, white or black, this way, that seems less than likely, and even so, the idea that players are merely beasts who perform on the field flies in the face of the educational mission of a high school—which is, of course, designed to instruct, to make citizens of its students. Meanwhile, football was supposed to be a way out of poverty for Boobie, a springboard to success. But while the team got lucky in its coin toss, Boobie got similarly unlucky in his injury. The town treats football as a game of pure will and skill, but Bissinger shows how both the team and its individual players are subject also to the whims of chance.

CHAPTER 14: FRIDAY NIGHT ADDICTION

Permian wins its first game of the playoffs, against Amarillo, very easily, although Coach Gaines is upset with what he consider a sloppy effort over a much weaker opponent. A few days after that game, the Permian players find a note in their lockers back in Odessa, presumably written by one of the assistant coaches, that calls them weak and "losers," more concerned with "flaunting rules" and getting "inebriated" than winning a state championship. The Permian players, though angered by the note, respond that they will work extra hard to defeated Irving, their next opponent.

Bissinger indicates that this anonymous note serves its intended purpose—it angers the players, who, even though they resolve to continue partying, don't want to think of themselves as "losers." This appeal to the strength and manliness of the football team is, unfortunately, all too common in the hyper-masculine world of West Texas football—and it helps players to win games.

Bissinger follows the team as they prepare whole-heartedly for Irving, using the note as motivation. Irving has Roderick Walker, one of the most highly-touted running backs in the US that year, on its squad, but the Permian defense is prepared, and they beat Irving to earn a berth in the quarterfinals, as one of the final eight teams—the true state playoff. After the victory Don Billingsley vows that he will "get inebriated" and "flaunt rules"—a nod to the letter that helped galvanize the team.

Of course, once the team wins, Billingsley wants everyone to know that he will do nothing to amend his ways. The other players recognize that, so long as they win, they will be allowed to drink and party and even start fights. It is only if the team is in danger of losing that parties become problematic, and that coaches chastise players for their "flaunting of rules."

Bissinger, in the leadup to the state quarterfinal game against Arlington, interviews several former players, all of whom were on state championship teams at Permian. One, Jerry Hix, was almost unbelievably undersized to play football—only 5 feet 8 inches, and 135 pounds—yet he led the Panthers to a title in 1980, scoring a go-ahead touchdown in the state semis. Joe Bob Bizzell, another Permian star, was good enough to play college ball at the University of Texas, but was eventually kicked off the college team for smoking marijuana—a decision that ended his football-playing life. Another player, Daniel Justis, complains of the arthritis and aches he now experiences, from his days of playing football. All the former players mourn the loss of high school football as something that impacted the rest of their lives—which are disappointments, compared to their heroic high school selves.

These three former players, like Shawn Crow at the beginning of the book, have taken mighty blows on the football field, and there is now evidence of their high-school football trauma later in life. As before, Bissinger focuses on bodily pain, and not on the side effects of repeated blows to the head, which were not studied intensely and understood scientifically until some twenty years after the publication of the book. But still, the idea is clear—playing football has serious consequences for the body, and though the glory of any given moment on the field will pass, some of the ailments that playing entails last for many years, or even until death.

Bissinger follows Ivory Christian in the lead-up to the game against Arlington, in the state quarters. Ivory, who was until recently interested in a preaching career after high school football, is now being recruited by Texas Christian University, and Christian finds that his love of the game has increased once again—because the thought of a college scholarship is becoming more real. In part due to Christian's strong performance in the quarterfinals, Permian handily defeats Arlington, and goes on to the semis where it will face Dallas' Carter High, a historically black high school with an incredibly strong team, one of the best in the country.

Here, Ivory Christian's commitment to preaching wavers, and understandably. Christian has worked every day, for years, in order to make his way onto the Permian team, and how he has an opportunity at a free college education at a quality university in Texas. Although Christian does not immediately abandon his desire to join the ministry, the offer from TCU is, in many ways, too good for him to pass up. For Christian, football has given him a future, even as in the paragraphs just before Bissinger shows how football has limited the futures of Jerry Hix, Bob Bizzell, and Daniel Justis.

CHAPTER 15: THE ALGEBRAIC EQUATION

Before he gets to the semifinal game, Bissinger describes Carter High School in Dallas—in particular, its peculiar academic reputation. During the fall '88 season, Carter had become famous state- and nationwide for its academic troubles, related, of all things, to the Algebra II grade earner by a football player named Gary Edwards. Edwards, like other Carter players, was basically required to do very little schoolwork—sometimes he and teammate Derric Evans would sit down to take tests and find their exam papers with answers already on them, provided by the teachers. Evans and Edwards needed only to keep a state minimum grade in all subjects to maintain athletic eligibility, and to help Carter win a state championship.

If Permian could be considered academically problematic, then Carter is a school where football so clearly reigns supreme, it is hard to imagine what the school would look like without its team. The eligibility requirements, as Bissinger describes them, are more or less nominal, designed to make the system look honest. But they are easily gotten around. And in this instance, Carter High puts as much pressure on the state as possible, to ensure that Edwards will be able to play in the state tournament.

In Algebra II, Will Bates, Edwards' teacher, had given him a non-passing grade, below 70, for the semester, before Edwards, at the football coach's insistence, was switched to an easier algebra class. But Edwards grade was "reevaluated" by his teachers, who felt that the new, easier algebra grades, including "participation," had counted for too much. Thus the superintendent of Dallas schools, brought on to review Edwards' eligibility, changed Edwards' grade back to a 68.75, not high enough to pass. Edwards was kept off the football team, and three victories were forfeit for Carter, keeping them out of the playoffs.

Although Bates' motivations are never made fully explicit, it appears that he is just doing his job, holding his students accountable, and grading as the homework, tests, and other scores dictate. But Bates' opposition to the prevailing football culture cannot stand for long. As the long, litigious process here outlined indicates, Carter will not stop, as an institution, until Edwards is cleared to play, because Carter wants, more than anything, to win the state title in football.

But this was not to be the last word in Carter's football saga, for the '88 season. For, after much criticism in the local press, Dallas's school superintendent changed Edwards' grade back to a 72, after "reevaluating" again Edwards' participation and homework scores. A grade above 70 meant that the team's victories were reinstated, and Carter was back in the playoffs, where it beat Plano. The superintendent had accidentally waded into a quagmire, angering nearly everyone in Dallas: white families, who believed he was helping a largely black school (Carter) to succeed; black families, who believed the superintendent had unfairly targeted Edwards from the beginning; and other schools, who believed they, not Carter, should be playing in the state playoffs.

Bissinger also notes the racial element in these proceedings, which, as in all things in Texas, complicates what was already a fairly murky situation. For it would appear unfair for the state to come down on a historically black school, when many other "white" schools, like Permian, are surely also making plain that football players will pass, in order that they can take the field and help their teams to win. For Bissinger, the problem is not racial but rather systemic, and it stems from the position football maintains over all other high school activities in the state.

As Bissinger reports, the issue was resolved in a state legal case, broadcast by the media across Texas—as Carter continued to play in the playoffs (since Edwards had been reinstated to the team under the superintendent's direction). A first court case, in a lower regional court, saw a judge order that Edwards had, in fact, failed Algebra II, and that the Dallas superintendent was wrong to interfere in the grading process. But Carter supporters petitioned for, and were granted, a stay from a higher court, allowing Carter to remain in the playoffs, where they beat Marshall High in the quarters and setting up a showdown with Permian in the state semis. As John Wilkins, the Ector County athletic director, arranged for the playoff game with Carter, Carter supporters awaited a state court decision on whether Carter and Edwards were eligible to play.

Carter, then, is allowed to remain in the playoffs, and though Bissinger argues that this is probably an unfair system—even a ludicrous system, with its court proceedings over a three point swing in the algebra grade of a single student—it appears more or less an inevitable outcome. For these towns, and school districts, football is an investment—schools pour thousands and thousands of dollars into their programs, and they do so because they want to win championships, and because winning championships builds up their community support. Although schools know that they should put academics first, the pressure within fan communities on the football team is so great, it causes compromises to be made, and from there the cycle is self-propelling.

As Bissinger points out, the state judge ruled, finally, that Carter was eligible, that Edwards' grade was as open to interpretation as anything else, and that it was up to the discretion of the school and its superintendent to set that grade. The state court judge also argued that it was "absurd" to try to set grades by statute in order to guarantee football eligibility. Carter rejoiced and prepared for its game against Permian. And, as Bissinger concludes, only one person had serious consequences for his behavior: Will Bates, whose "salary was frozen," and who was moved into an industrial-arts classroom in a Dallas middle school, where his grading could no longer affect football players' careers.

As in all controversies, too, there must be a scapegoat, and here, since the institution of Carter High, and its football team, is so powerful, an individual, rather than an entire system, will have to be punished. Will Bates, whose only "crime" was giving a student a deserved failing grade, is demoted into a job for which he is overqualified, just so that Carter will never again have to worry about Bates grading a football player. Put another way: the school will do what it must, and can legally do, to protect its football team from academic standards or expectations.

CHAPTER 16: FIELD OF DREAMS

Bissinger describes the state semifinal matchup between Permian and Carter. Carter is the more talented team, with players like Evans and Edwards, known for their toughness and offensive prowess. Bissinger notes that only Ivory Christian and a few other players could be considered real stars; otherwise, Permian must make do on its "heart," grit, and effort. The game is in Austin, in December, and it is wet and icy. Winchell before the kickoff, worries that the wet grass and cold weather will give him a bad grip on the ball. He has an ill omen that the game might not go well.

Always a kind of subtle prophet, Winchell fears, correctly, that the weather will shake his confidence, and will keep him from playing his best. Of course, it is hard to know whether Winchell's confidence shakes because, in the first place, he is not able to imagine himself winning the game—and then the wet grass becomes merely an expedient for his failure. But nevertheless, Winchell feels that all is lost before the game begins.

The game begins, and Winchell's prediction seems accurate. He cannot get much momentum offensively, and though Chris Comer scores first for Permian, the kicker misses the extra point. Carter promptly scores themselves and makes the extra point, to go up 7-6. At halftime, the Permian players do their best to encourage one another, but the players seem to recognize that they are overmatched, and that their season is probably slipping away. Permian adds a field goal in the second half, but Carter scores another touchdown. Winchell continues to have difficulty moving the ball down the field, but the Permian running game, under Comer, is strong enough to make a final push in Carter territory, with only a minute to go and a touchdown needed to win the game (the score is 14-9, with Carter in the lead).

As Bissinger describes it, it becomes apparent, throughout the stands, that Permian has lost its "Mojo," and that few of the players now believe that they have what it takes to beat Carter, even though they are still in the game at the beginning of the second half. Carter is an intimidating squad, filled with athletes who will go on to play in college, and perhaps Permian has met a team whose talent so far outstrips its own that no amount of "heart" can make up for it. Yet, on the other side, one might argue that it is precisely lack of heart that allows Permian players to think that they can't handle Carter's better. That if the Permian team had more heart it wouldn't lose its "Mojo," and thus might win.

Bissinger then summarizes the responses of various fans and characters to the events on the field. He notes that Shawn Crow, former Permian standout, is watching the game nervously, as is Gaines' wife Sharon, and Boobie, in the stands, where he wonders whether he made the right decision leaving the team. Winchell throws up the ball on fourth down, the last chance for the Panthers to make it into the end zone and tie or win the game . . . but the pass falls short, and Bissinger notes that the Carter fans and players jump around wildly, knowing that they are now headed to the state championship. Permian has lost, 14-9.

From the stands, Bissinger mimics the structure he used at the beginning of the book, to detail the loss to Midland Lee—he takes the viewpoints of various characters, all watching the game at once, and shows how they deal with the sadness of the season winding down, in the games' final minutes. Here, Bissinger takes a kind of artistic license—although, as a reporter, he cannot be in several places at once, still he captures something "true" about the final minutes of the season.

On the ride back to Odessa, and afterward, the Panthers are devastated: many, like McDougal and Chavez, cry bitterly, knowing that their seasons and high-school football lives are over. Gaines thanks the team for its wonderful year, and they gather together one last time in the locker room, to pray together. Gaines has done just enough, in reaching the final four, to keep his job for another year, but most of the seniors will be moving on to lives without football. Bissinger closes this part of the book with a scene of trainers removing the names of Winchell, Chavez, Christian, and others from the lockers, preparing to post up new names, for the members of the '89 squad.

A sad scene. The individual players are crushed by their loss, both by losing and by the end of their football careers (which many of them have been brought up to believe will be the pinnacle of their lives). Meanwhile, even as these players have been celebrated and made stars in their town from the Watermelon Feed through the season, they can never be more important than the Permian team, the Permian "brand" and its legacy. The coaches and the institution protect that legacy, rather than individual players, and their loyalty is to the institution itself. The players, like Shawn Crow before them, just float into life without football, without a clear safety net—a terrifying and murky future, while the players a year behind them just shift up into their places.

EPILOGUE

Bissinger summarizes what happens to many of the book's main characters, in a short epilogue appended to the last chapter. He states that Carter won the state championship in '88, after a strong performance in the title game. Both Derric Evans and Gary Edwards were recruited to play D-1 college football, but in the spring and summer of '89, before college, they committed armed robberies—perhaps brought on by a sense of power and invincibility, born of football—and were sentenced to long prison sentences.

Similarly terrifying is the fate of Edwards and Evans, who, on the field, were such gifted athletes, but who are, in Bissinger's assertion, perhaps too intoxicated by all the things money, sports, and fame can provide. Also, there is a sense that these star players, by being allowed to play even when it was against the rules, may have gained the sense that there were no rules they couldn't break, that their football talent made them untouchable. On the one hand, such a thought is crazy. On the other, these are nineteen year-olds who, it seems likely, were allowed to do whatever they wanted at Carter so long as they shined in football. Once again, Bissinger suggests that the emphasis on football above all other things can warp both young men and communities.

Some of the Permian players have better luck. Chavez is accepted to Harvard, where he does not play varsity football but continues his studies. McDougal works for his father in the West Texas oil business, and Don Billingsley, after formally separating himself from his alcoholic father, plays a little college football and reflects positively on his experiences with the Permian team. Winchell walks on at Baylor, after having been refused a scholarship to play D-1 football, but he still complains of his inability to find consistency as a passer. Ivory Christian is offered a scholarship to play for TCU, and his dreams of being a preacher seem largely to be put on the back burner. Boobie reconciles somewhat with his uncle LV, and plays for a junior college, though his knee injury keeps him from being as explosive as he once was.

Bissinger is rather clear in his assertion that Chavez, so successful on the field, is also a success off it, a young man who knows that there is life beyond the stadium. And, notably, Chavez doesn't play football in college. Billingsley and Winchell, in contrast, seem to still want to feel the thrill and power of football, but their focus on football seems to shunt aside any other ambitions or future. And Boobie, robbed of his speed and power by the bad luck of an injury, never gets the boost from football that he needed. Of all the players, Chavez makes his own future, and football only seems to give a future that otherwise might not be accessible to one: Ivory Christian.

And Gary Gaines, long thought to be "too soft" for the coaching job, leads the '89 squad, with a new group of talented players, all the way back to the state tournament, where they win the state championship. Bissinger ends the book noting that, although Odessa has received its fair share of economic setbacks in the 1980s, its football team in 1989, like in 1980, has finished the season at the top of Texas.

What is perhaps most startling is that Gaines, after being considered "soft" during his entire 1988 season, is back again in 1989, and this time, he has a reputation for winning, after the '88 squad makes it to the final four. In many ways, as Bissinger shows, the achievements of the team are placed on the shoulders of the coach—if the team wins, the coach is considered a genius. The players shuffle through, but the coaches, the institution, and the fans—they get to hold onto the winning memories that often buoy this small, football-mad community.

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