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Friday Night Lights

A Town, a Team, and a Dream

by

H. G. 'Buzz' Bissinger

1990 and updated in 2000



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Permian High School in the west Texas oil town of Odessa, Texas in 1988; the cities of Midland, Texas and Dallas, Texas are also settings for parts of the story.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

H. G. Bissinger - The author of the this book is also the narrator who unfolds his experiences with the Permian Panthers during the 1988 football season. His viewpoint, being an outsider, is integral to understanding the events and the emotions they spawned during that painful season.

Boobie Miles - One of the six players the narrator focuses on, he is the ultimate example of “woulda, shoulda, coulda” after a silly ankle injury during a scrimmage ends a promising career.

Jerrod McDougal - He is the player who readily admits that even years after he graduates, he can’t let go of Permian football. He likens the experience to gladiators or Christians versus the lions with Caesar standing up in the arena asking the crowd to yell “yay or nay.”

Mike Winchell - He is the team’s quarterback whose lack of confidence in himself leads to mistakes that he questions the rest of his life. His hopes and dreams are to play college ball, but in the end, he knows that his dream will probably never come true.

Ivory Christian - He is the black player whose vomiting before each game is almost a comforting sound to the other players that events are moving along like they’re supposed to. He has ambivalent feelings about football – he hates it at the same time it has a funny hold on him.

Brian Chavez - He is the only Hispanic who is a starter and unlike the other players to whom school and grades are incidental to football, his goals involve being accepted by Harvard. He is the valedictorian of his class, but loves the thrill of the hits that come with football.

Don Billingsly - He is the excellent football player who cannot get his drinking problem under control. He loves the game but looks forward to the girls, alcohol, and parties that follow every game.....
Additional characters are identified and discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonists

The Protagonists are the narrator and the six young men upon whom he places the focus of his reporting. They are the ones who experience every agony and every triumph of the 1988 season of Permian football. They are the ones who learn about being gladiators and holding a whole town upon their.....

Antagonists

It might be said that the antagonists of this book are the opponents of the Permian Panthers, and in a great sense, they are. But the greater antagonists are the inner demons of each.....

Climax

The climax is the loss to the Carter High School Cowboys in the semi-finals of the State Championship series. This game brings an end to the dream and forever creates in each boy who.....

Outcome

The narrator explains what each boy went on to achieve or lose in the ten years that followed the 1988 season as well as the outcome for the Carter High Cowboys. Brian Chavez went to Harvard and became a lawyer. Jerrod McDougal went to work for his father, but never stopped thinking about Permian football. Don Billingsley continued to drink heavily after graduating, but eventually turned to sobriety and.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

This book is a realistic and journalistic report on the year the author spent in Odessa and followed the Permian High School Panthers through the 1988 football season. He focuses on six of the players and the agonies and triumphs they experience as well as exposing the truth about life in a.....

THEMES

The most important theme of the novel involves **the impact of adults' hopes and goals lived vicariously through their children**. The people of Odessa place an unmistakable burden on the shoulders of their sons – to be champions every year so that the adults can take the triumph as their own. The result is that their children can never leave their triumphs and defeats of that short time behind. It follows them no matter what they make of their lives, and it is unfair that they must do so.

The theme of **life isn't always fair** is also an important idea. Boobie Miles exemplifies this idea when he injures his knee during a scrimmage and can never play football as well again. He has a terribly difficult time adjusting to being someone other than the high school hero. It impacts.....

Additional themes are identified in the complete study guide.

MOOD

The story of the Permian Panthers in 1988 has its moments of victory and triumph, but the overall mood is one of sadness, loneliness, despair, and an inability to leave the “dream” behind.....

H. G. "BUZZ" BISSINGER - BIOGRAPHY

He was born on November 1, 1954 in New York City, New York. He attended the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts before attending the University of Pennsylvania (1972-1976), where he became the editor of the school newspaper (the *Daily Pennsylvanian*) and graduated in 1976. He went to work in the newspaper field as a reporter. This later won him the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for *Investigative Journalism* (1987), the Livingston Award, the National Headliner Award, and the.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND ANALYSIS / NOTES

**“In the Shreve High football stadium,
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel
Dreaming of heroes.”**

- From *Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio* by James Wright

Notes

This poem is about Martins Ferry, Ohio, by is significantly applicable to Odessa, Texas where the same hope for heroes pops up every Autumn in American towns.

PREFACE

Summary

The Preface is the author's explanation for how he came to Odessa, Texas to live for one year with a high school football team. He explains that he felt something nagging at him to see for himself what was out there. He wanted to see how the idea of high school sports keeps a town together. So he goes in search of Friday night lights. All of the roads of his research lead him to Odessa, Texas and the team called the Permian Panthers that played to an average of 20,000 fans on Friday night.

He begins by describing the town, how it is divided into the eastern suburban area and the area called the Southside, which is inhabited predominately by minorities. Then, he visits the stadium to imagine for himself what it must be like for those rows of bleachers to be filled to capacity under the lights on a Friday night.

He comes to Odessa in March of 1988, and meets the coach to relay the intent of his journey there. He wants to live there for a year and spend the season with the team. He has come to realize that this is a town where high school football goes to the very core of life. It is a depressed area with many for sale signs and empty factories. It makes him want to know their attitudes toward race, their politics, the state of their educational system, what motivates the people during the loss of their economic base, and what has happens to their American Dream. So he left his job as a newspaper editor for the Philadelphia Inquirer in July 1988 and moved to Odessa, Texas.

He meets the team and for the next four months, he is with them through every practice, meeting, and game to chronicle the highs and lows of being a high school football player. He also goes to school with them, and church, and into their homes, and even rattlesnake hunting, because he wants to portray them as more than just football players. He also talks to hundreds of people in the community to try to capture their values about race and education and politics and the economy.

He further explores how he and his wife and his children become caught up in the Friday night lights as well, even as he sees the inevitable danger of adults living vicariously through their children. He comes to the realization that these kids held the town on their shoulders, but that Odessa could be any town in America.

Notes

The purpose of the Preface is to introduce the reader to the town and the people of Odessa. More importantly, it prepares us for the highs and lows of being a high school football player in town where winning is not everything; it's the only thing.

PROLOGUE

The author begins the story from the viewpoint of Boobie Miles, a black athlete who as a junior at Permian had already begun to be courted by colleges all over the place. He had been raised first in foster homes, but eventually came to live with his uncle, L. V. Miles, who had great dreams of a Heisman Trophy for his talented nephew and had worked with him for years on how to play football. Unfortunately, he had injured his knee which led to arthroscopic surgery and meant surgery later. Now, he couldn't move as he had done before and the opposition seemed out to get the knee and ruin it forever. But he has a fire in his belly, because the Panthers are going to play Midland Lee, their arch-rivals, for the district championship. If they win, it is a guaranteed trip to the State Championship playoffs and a chance to go all the way to State. He feels as if this night will bring back the fans, the college recruiters. So he feels good as he walks into the locker room that morning to pull on his #35 jersey and go to the pep rally where the entire student body is wildly cheering. The cockiness and the attitude are back and he can hardly wait to get the ball, tuck it under his arm and run forever like "someone in the euphoria of flight."

He tries to concentrate in class all day, but feels it's all irrelevant, because the true purpose of going to Permian High School is to play football for the Panthers. There is almost desperation in his emotions, like an aging prizefighter, as he ponders whether he'll be able to regain his former footing or whether he's already a has-been.

Jerrod McDougal leaves school at the end of the day and does what he always does to pass the time before he's due at the stadium: he climbs into his Chevy pickup and turns up the sounds of Bon Jovi. As he listens to the music, he feels like there's no way Midland Lee can beat them. He knows that he is too small to ever make a college team, but he also knows that he's an offensive tackle with a lot of heart, even if he has no natural ability. He thinks that high school football is like the gladiators in ancient Rome or the Christians facing the lions in the Coliseum while Caesar calls for a thumbs-up or thumbs-down from the crowd. He says it's a high that no drugs or booze or women can give.

Mike Winchell hates the moments in the field house before the game begins. He is the quarterback, which gives him a certain status over the other players. However, it's hard for him not to feel overwhelmed at the same time. He lives in a shabby house and doesn't own his own car. He's so ashamed of his home that he won't even allow his girlfriend to enter. That plus the expectations of the community intensify the pressure he feels. He wants more than anything to play for a big time college so a good game against Midland Lee would be vindication, further proof that he has what it takes. Later, he partakes of the obligatory pre-game meetings and then as part of a long-standing tradition, the lights are turned out to allow the players to focus on the coming game. For Mike, this is the worst part of all.

When the sound of vomiting echoes throughout the dressing room, everyone knows it is Ivory Christian who goes through this physical reaction to the game every week. It is an example of his ambivalence toward football. There is so much about the game he hates, but it also has a funny hold on him. He is a gifted linebacker with a potential he doesn't even begin to fathom. The vomiting then is his catharsis. It gets out the ambivalence and the fear, and he becomes ready for the game.

The sounds in the dressing room in the final minutes before the game seem amplified a thousand times. They are like boys going off to fight a war for the benefit of someone else, unwilling sacrifices to a strange and powerful god. Boobie sits on a bench with his eyes closed while Jerrod paces back and forth, becoming enraged from the sound of the Midland Band playing "Dixie." Gaines, the head coach, then calls them together with a short message but one that is sincere. It's time for the contest.

Brian Chavez, Ivory Christian, and Mike Winchell, the three captains, make their way to the center of the field for the coin toss. For Brian, it is the beginning of a metamorphosis. As a tight end, he prepares himself to hit his opponent as hard as he can to hurt him or scare him or make him think twice about getting back up again. He knows he's an "asshole" when he plays, but he figures it's better to be that way on the field than in life. He is number one in his class and his aspirations extend to being accepted at Harvard. But now he wasn't thinking about Harvard. He was thinking about the District Champs patch he has already ordered for his letter jacket. That's how confident he is and that's how much he hates Midland Lee.

The team leaves the dressing room behind a huge banner, and when they pour onto the field, the crowd erupts with such a deep-throated roar that they seem to lose sight of who they are. These are their boys, their heroes, and they rest all their vicarious thrills and dreams upon them. They begin to yell, "MOJO, MOJO, MOJO!", the Permian motto taken from an old Wilson Picket song from the late sixties. On the other side came the screams, "Rebels! Rebels! Rebels!" in response. There were Confederate flags in the hands of the Midland Lee fans and white handkerchiefs in those of Permian. The bands played songs in competition with each other while the Rebelettes match cheer for cheer with the Pepettes. Then, the teams take the field.

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Instead of Boobie carrying the ball, it falls to his replacement, Chris Comer, the new black hope, who makes a 77 yard run to put Permian up 14-7. Boobie comes to the realization that the coaches have no intention of playing him that night. He sits on the bench and feels a coldness swirl through him as if something sacred were dying inside him. He watches his dream disappear and knows there's nothing he can do about it. The score at halftime is 21-16.

The Permian players are exhausted and in a fight they never expected. The strange Lee touchdown at the end of the half is like a weird and scary omen. Boobie is in a furious rage, determined to quit at halftime of the biggest game of the year. None of the varsity coaches make any attempt to stop him, but for Nate Hearne, a black JV coach. The rest privately deride him as shiftless, lazy, stupid, just another "dumb nigger." But Hearne convinces him he can't quit in the middle of game, and Boobie reluctantly puts his pads back on even though it seems as if he's wearing a Halloween costume.

The Rebels score early in the 4th quarter to make the score 22-21 and to take the lead. Brian Chavez can feel the game slipping away. They are going to lose and Mike Winchell, after making a sixty yard TD pass in the first quarter, now can't complete a pass to an open flanker Robert Brown. The Rebels win.

Jerrod watches in agony as the Midland Lee players roll all over the field in ecstasy at their win, spitting on the ground of their arch-rivals. He has never in his life felt so humiliated. What's more, Permian, now in a three way tie, might not get into the playoffs.

Boobie officially quits the team three days later. The loss sends the team into a tailspin. Coach Gaines is distraught – a whole year's worth of work has been wasted and the chorus against him is beginning to pick up. He comes home to the sight of stolen "For Sale" signs all over his yard. He isn't surprised by them because he is a high school coach in a town where realtor Bob Rutherford said, "Life really wouldn't be worth livin' if you didn't have a high school football team to support."

Notes

The author begins the story in the middle of the season during the agony of the loss to Midland Lee, Permian's arch-rivals. It allows the reader to see immediately how sacred high school football is in Odessa, Texas. We see the hopes and dreams of the players and in the case of Boobie Miles, we see the loss of those dreams. This is all there is for these young men and, this night under the lights, they have lost it all.

PRE-SEASON

CHAPTER ONE - Odessa

On a dog-day Monday in the middle of August, practice for the 1988 season begins. No matter what the fantasies of the players, it all seems possible this day. On the wall of the field house, every player who had made All-State during the last 29 years is immortalized in a four by six inch frame. There are proclamations honoring State Championship teams. The color black reflects everywhere from the black and white cabinets to the black rug in the shape of a Panther. It is more historical and enduring than anything Odessa, the town could proclaim.

Odessa was settled in the 1880's by a group of men from Zanesville, Ohio, who wanted to attract people to the land they had bought. But the land was virtually impossible to farm anything, because of the difficulty of getting water, so it eked out a living from the livestock trade. Then, the droughts came and raising livestock became impossible. Fortunately, the town was sitting in the midst of the Permian Basin, a geologic formation that would ultimately produce roughly 20 percent of the nation's domestic oil and gas. Then, it became inundated with men simply known as boomers, because the town's fortunes now became entwined with the oil cycles of boom and bust. It gained a reputation for a hearty, hair-trigger temperament and earned the distinction in 1982 of having the highest murder rate in the country. By 1987, *Money Magazine* ranked it as the 5th worst

city to live in in the country out of 300. Nonetheless, it was “a place rooted in the sweet nostalgia of the fifties – unsophisticated, basic, raw – a place where anybody could be somebody, a place still clinging to all the tenets of the American Dream, however wobbly they had become.”

Whatever else Odessa had or didn't have, there had always been high school football. Everyone knew where they had been when the team won a State Football Championship, so it isn't unusual that expectations are high at the beginning of the 1988 season. No one can see how Permian could miss a trip to State. Coach Gaines hates the assumptions, because it creates more room for anger and disappointment if the team doesn't get there. For the moment in the field house on this first day of practice, the team belongs to no one. But all too soon they will be unveiled to the public, and then they would become the property of those so desperately devoted to it. The great unveiling will take place in late August at the Permian Booster Club's Watermelon Feed, when the excitement and madness will quickly move into high gear.

Notes

This chapter gives the reader a historical background to the town of Odessa with all its cycles of boom and bust, more bust than boom. This history is significant, because it helps explain how the town came to depend so much on high school football to take away the disappointments that came with living in a town like Odessa.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

H.G. Bissinger

He is at heart a journalist and comes to Odessa to report on a town and a team and their failures and successes. In the end, unlike a novelist, he must report the truth as he sees it unfold before him. What he reports is not pretty, but at the same time, it is terribly poignant when he shows us what the future holds for many of these players after their high school football careers are over.

Boobie Miles

He is the one of all the players on whom the author focuses that engenders the most empathy from the reader. Football is all Boobie has in his life. He is not smart enough to.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The author begins with a preface explaining why he moved to Odessa, Texas and follows that with a Prologue which places the reader at the end of a devastating loss to Midland Lee, Permian's arch rivals. Then, the story uses flashback to show how the season began and introduces the reader to the six players he.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The theme of **the impact of adults' hopes and goals lived vicariously through their children** is one of the most domineering of the book. The author is very astute in how he presents such people as Tony Chavez who loves how well his son plays but is more interested in him getting into Harvard. Tony, however, is a minority. Most of the parents are like Dale McDougal who lives for the wonder of watching her son under the Friday night lights. She sobs with him when the team loses and she is one of the first to blame Coach Gaines when they lose. She is so angry at him for not leading the team to a win that she can't even look at him. There are also parents like Don Billingsley's father who remember their own days as.....
Additional themes are identified and analyzed in the complete study guide.

AUTHOR'S STYLE

The author's style is in the tone of a reporter writing an exposé, a story about a town, its problems, and what it lives for. He is realistic in presenting the highs and the lows of a boom and bust town which lives for Friday night high school football. He shows the people as they really are and

RISING ACTION

The rising action begins with chapter one when the author uses flashback to tell the story of the 1988 football season. He has already introduced the biggest game of the season in the Prologue and.....

FALLING ACTION

The falling action involves the impact of the loss to Carter High School on the.....

POINT OF VIEW

The point of view is third person, but it is not omniscient. Because it is through the.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

There are several other literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is **foreshadowing** which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

- 1.) Boobie comes to the realization that the coaches have no intention of playing him the night of the Midland Lee game. That's when we are given

Another element that is important to note is **irony** – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

- 1.) Boobie has planned to quit the team in the middle of a game, but is convinced not to by one of the coaches. He reluctantly puts his pads back on even though, ironically, it.....

QUOTATIONS - IMPORTANT QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points in the story:(Da Capo Press, 1990 –main narrative; 2000 - afterword)

1. “Those lights become an addiction if you live in a place like Odessa, the Friday Night fix.” (pg. xiv – Here is the real explanation by the author for the problems in Odessa.)
2. “It's like gladiators.” (pg. 7; This is Jerrod McDougal's explanation of Texas football.)
3. “The solemn ritual made them seem like boys going off to fight a war for the benefit of someone else, unwitting sacrifices to a strange and powerful god.” (pg. 11; this is the author's analysis of the pressure placed on these young men to be winners for the benefit of the people who watched them.).....

SYMBOLISM/MOTIFS/IMAGERY/SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel are **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

1. Its is metaphorical when Boobie sits on the bench and feels a coldness swirl through him as if something sacred were dying inside him. He watches his dream disappear and knows there's nothing he can do about it.

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2. The men in their fifties and sixties treated the memory of each game as a crystal prism that looked more beautiful and intricate every time it was lifted to the light.....

Another element found in this book is a motif. **A motif** is a recurring thematic element in the development of an artistic or literary work. There are some motifs in *Friday Night Lights* as follows:

1. “For Brian, it is the beginning of a metamorphosis. As a tight end, he prepares himself to hit his opponent as hard as he can to hurt him or scare him or make him think twice about getting back up again. He knows he’s an “asshole” when he plays, but he figures it’s better to be that way on the field than in life. He is number one in his class and his aspirations extend to being accepted at Harvard. But now he wasn’t thinking about Harvard. He was thinking about the District Champs patch he has already ordered for his letter jacket. That’s how confident he is and that’s how.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

- **Title:** *Friday Night Lights*
- **Author:** H. G. Bissinger
- **Date Published:** 1990 (main section) | 2000 (afterword)
- **Meaning of the Title:** It refers symbolically to the addiction of high school football among the people of West Texas.
- **Setting:** Odessa, Dallas, and Midland, Texas
- **Protagonists:** The author, Mike Winchell, Jerrod McDougal, Brian Chavez, Boobie Miles, Ivory Christian, and Don Billingsley as well as the town of Odessa
- **Antagonist:** The inner issues that Odessa faces as the result of their addiction for high school football.
- **Mood:** At times, the mood is very sad as each of the young men must face the end of the glory they had envisioned. Sometimes, it is triumphant, but mostly it is pathetic when.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. The biggest rival the Permian Panthers faces is
 - a. the Carter Cowboys.
 - b. Odessa High School.
 - c. Midland Lee.
2. Odessa is a town first established by
 - a. the Texas state legislature.
 - b. two gentlemen from Zanesville, Ohio.
 - c. oil boomers.
3. The team is introduced every year at the
 - a. Watermelon Feed.
 - b. Booster Club steak fry.
 - c. giant Pep Rally in the stadium.....

ANSWER KEY

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1.) c 2.) b 3.) a 4.) a 5.) b 6.) c 7.) a 8.) b 9.) b 10.) a 11.) c 12.) a 13.) a 14.) c 15.) c

ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Of the Odessa team preparing for the game against Midland Lee, the author writes that “the perfection of their equipment . . . the solemn ritual that was attached to almost everything, made them seem like boys going off to fight a war for the benefit of someone else, unwitting sacrifices to a strange and powerful god.” In what ways might these players be viewed as unwitting sacrifices? How would you describe the strange and powerful god to whom they were being sacrificed?

What conclusions about Odessa might be drawn from the fact that the 235 page history of Permian football was more detailed than any of the histories of the town itself?.....

END OF SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM MONKEYNOTES FOR "FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS" BY H. G. BUZZ BISSINGER

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