

Book Review:

*Friday Night Lights* by H.G. Bissinger:

Proof that Good Non-fiction Writing Can Make Even *Me* to Care about Football

When I hear the phrase “Friday Night Lights”, what immediately comes to mind is the television show, which most of my family members are currently obsessed with. They try to convince me to give the show a chance; my mom always tells me that it’s not *just* about football (something that I neither enjoy watching or in any way understand). But now, after reading H.G. Bissinger’s *Friday Night Lights*, I can see how possible it is for a story to be entirely linked to the larger-than-life world of high school football in Texas, and still be about so much more.

While the widely known television series is only loosely inspired by Bissinger’s work, the book was also adapted into a critically acclaimed film of the same name. Bissinger’s other non-fiction books are also highly acclaimed, such as *A Prayer for the City*, *Three Nights in August*, *Shooting Stars*, and *Father’s Day*. Bissinger has won the Pulitzer Prize, the Livingston Award, the National Headliners Award, among others. He has also worked as a reporter for magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, and *The New York Times*.

In 1988, after quitting his job at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Bissinger moved to Odessa, Texas in order to write *Friday Night Lights*. The fact that Bissinger actually lived in Odessa is unmistakable in his work: he notes in the preface that he spent “every practice, every meeting, every game” (xiii) with the team, and talked to hundreds of people to capture other aspects of the town. He not only sat on the

sidelines and reported on the players, but he “went to school with them, and went home with them, and rattlesnake hunting with them, and to church with them” (xiii). He states he does this in order to portray them as more than just football players. For me, this was the most impressive aspect of *Friday Night Lights*. The Permian football players were not just jocks: they were complex characters with a huge range of motivations. The more I learned about the players, the more I genuinely cared how each of their stories played out.

One standout character development was created through the chapter “The Ambivalence of Ivory”. Bissinger was able to learn so much about Ivory’s complex relationship with football: he observed the moments where Ivory clearly loved the game, as well as closely followed his conversion to religion and the intensity of this change. Football, Bissinger describes, “lingered as his perpetual, unconquerable nemesis”(124). Ivory’s story is one example of a character turning the jock stereotype on its head. Bissinger’s extensive time spent with the team let him see the real people behind the players, and in Ivory’s case, see the complex struggle with what football means for him.

I enjoyed how the arch of the book went from pre-season through to the playoffs. It was effective that as each new chapter or scene began, Bissinger used this particular player or idea to dive into a more pressing issue of the town itself. *Friday Night Lights* is a football story, but only partially. It is more of an expose on Odessa itself, and even further, small-town America in general. As Bissinger describes the players and develops their backgrounds, he also brings to the forefront issues of race, politics, and the school system. Chapter 5, “Black and White”

truly demonstrates the huge impact race issues have on the town and the rest of America. In Odessa in 1988, the word “nigger” was still commonly used throughout the town in casual conversation. Bissinger addresses the contrast between the racism promoted throughout the town, and the way the black football players are treated as “part of a different race altogether, as if something magical happened when those boys donned the black and white” (117).

Part of the fascination while reading *Friday Night Lights* was how completely foreign this world was to me. The idea of an entire town revolving around high school football is unimaginable to me as a Canadian who has only lived in Halifax and Toronto. He excels at describing each scene with such visible details that I could actually picture every situation and feel the atmosphere. One of the most well described scenes was the coin toss in “Heads or Tails”: Bissinger picks up on this strangeness, and meticulously portrays the tension around the outcome of one coin toss on the entire town. I was also impressed by the retelling of coach Gary Gaines’s response to the coin toss win, as Bissinger describes, “He took off like a madman, doing eighty-five down Highway 80 without being aware of it, giggling and grinning, and had you been next to the car at that moment you would have heard man yell something that you didn’t think grown men ever yelled, unless they had grown up in Crane: “Hot diggety dog!”” (282). I love this detail, because it is just one more piece of proof that Bissinger was right next to each of the characters as the story unfolded. Otherwise, he would never have these small bits of personality that develop the character as a whole.

By the end of *Friday Night Lights*, I actually cared about the team: I was genuinely curious if they would win the state championship, and wanted to know how each player's life turned out after the glory days of high school football. I was surprised by how much I liked this book. Bissinger's writing is so conversational and easy to read, that even when he transitions into more non-fiction research and statistics, it still flows along with the trajectory of the story. His scenes are vivid and each character was developed fully. Reading *Friday Night Lights* gave me a lot of inspiration for my final feature. I see how Bissinger was able to take one issue and expand it through the experiences of many different people; as I am discussing work-to-rule, I want to create the same type of overview that shows how many people are affected. I know that a story can be so much more powerful if the characters feel real and three-dimensional, and I need to remember this technique while writing so I can avoid creating stereotypes. Bissinger creates characters that the reader can care about, and that's what I want to do in my writing for this class, and in the future.