

Book and movie provide Hoop-Dreams insights for the high-school gridiron set

Book written by H.G. Bissinger

Screenplay written by David Aaron Cohen

Movie directed by Peter Berg

Movie Cast

Billy Bob Thornton ... Coach Gary Gaines

Lucas Black ... Mike Winchell

Garrett Hedlund ... Don Billingsley

Derek Luke ... Boobie Miles

Jay Hernandez ... Brian Chavez

Lee Jackson ... Ivory Christian

Lee Thompson Young ... Chris Comer

Tim McGraw ... Charles Billingsley

Grover Coulson ... L.V. Miles

Connie Britton ... Sharon Gaines

"There were many people in Odessa who, after the initial shock, had slowly fallen in love with the town. They found something endearing about it, something tender; it was the mutt that no one else wanted. The had come to grips with the numbing vacantness of the surroundings, broken only by the black horses' heads of oil pumpjacks moving up and down with maniacal monotony through heat and wind and dust and economic ruin." — page 34

The idea for Friday Night Lights sprang from a good writer's characteristic curiosity... and sense of unease that he needed to be engaged creatively elsewhere. "Buzz" Bissinger was living in Philadelphia at the time, in a "home that looked too much like the other houses on the block:"

"The idea had been rattling in head since I was 13 years old, the idea of high school sports keeping a town together, keeping it alive. So I went in search of the Friday night lights, to find a town where they brightly blazed, that lay beyond the East Coast and the grip of the big cities, a place that people had to pull out an atlas to find and had seen better times, a real America."

Thus began the journey to West Texas that would lead to a #1 New York Times bestseller, what some elevated reader of books at ESPN called, the "Best sports book of the last 25 years." Well, not having read that many sports books I'm not sure I can fully concur with the ESPN critic, but Bissinger certainly gives an honest docudramatic piece of work. So real, in fact, that he was advised to stay away from Odessa a couple of years later after the book had become a hit for personal safety reasons. (The 2004 movie is basically a one-to-one reflection of the book, whereas the 2006 TV series embellishes and fictionalizes the Panthers football team of Permian High School in Odessa.)

Bissinger, the author, came to Odessa to follow the Permian Panthers thru their entire 1988 season, attending practices as well as games, spending time with several of the key players and their families, reading the newspapers, interviewing the movers and shakers in the desolate, tapped-out landscape in the middle of Nowhere, Texas. Most of us have heard that Texans regard their high school football with the reverence of a born-again religion—remember the story about the mother of a cheerleader who sought to have her daughter's rival on the cheerleading squad wasted? (The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom (1993)) As a one-time resident and frequent soul mate—the movie Lone Star is one of my top ten, something from a previous life—I can vouch for its high-school football mania, in East Texas as well as in West.

Naturally, between the movie and the book, the book provides the deeper understanding of what life is really like for these teenage would-be gods of the midway, as well as for their peers in the school halls and the people of the town. The Permian—named for the Permian Basin, the geological formation in which

Odessa is located—Ratliff Stadium holds 20,000 fans and is a state-of-the-art facility built in 1982 at a cost of \$5.6 million. Football stadiums and related vending are big business in Texas, according to this article in the Dallas News. The home of the Permian Panthers is "the epicenter of Texas high school football." (Obviously, the author of that quote is a Panther fan.)

Bissinger gives us the history of the school and the history of the town. He covers the boom years in the 1970s (oil prices went from \$4/bbl in 1970 to \$48/bbl in 1980) into the Reagan early-'80s when the boom started lowering. The setting of the Permian Panthers run at another state championship is 1988-West Texas on the eve of the Bush I/Quayle vs. Dukakis/Bentsen campaign. How the author describes the Bush machinery's dirty political games, which were used to so predictably manipulate the simple passions of these people—as in the book, *Whatever Happened to Kansas*, folks supported a man who (via his Saudi friendships) would crush their recovery prospects—that you'd swear Karl Rove and Bushwhacker II had a hand in that 1988 race, too.

But one area in particular covered by the author is how football culture casts a spell over just about everyone... to the detriment of preparing the kids' minds for what lies ahead. "Considering the circumstances of their lives, how could they be expected to accept the harsh reality of studies showing that of the 30 million children taking part in youth sports in the United States, only about 200 go on to become professionals in any given year." Thus, the analogy to *Hoop Dreams*, a story of two inner city Chicago youngsters striving to make it to the NBA in basketball is strong. $200/30,000,000 = 0.00067\%$.

This sobering stat is so relevant for one James "Boobie" Miles (Derek Luke) a tall, strong, fast running back who at the beginning of the year has dozens of Division 1 football colleges sending him letters, even calling him, on a daily basis. Then on one meaningless play, with the Panthers up by several touchdowns, when Boobie should have been substituted out, his knee 'breaks'—the ACL (anterior cruciate ligament). And for Boobie, whose work ethic is only a little better than his study ethic, the injury means he'll never get into a top college football program... and you can kiss the pros goodbye.

So how often does a stunning high-school prospect—particularly from minority groups who have been sold unrealistic hopes ("Gridiron Dreams") of rags to riches thru football—lose all his sports' tomorrows in a millisecond? Way too. I recall that black sociologist, Dr. Harry Edwards, who it seemed at one time tried to attune the young black male world to the realities of sport... and to lift itself instead through education more into creative, productive work. Judging from recent history, despite much greater awareness of the role of athletics in society, I doubt much of a dent has been made.

But ultimately *Friday Night Lights* is a microcosm of our own world, especially the dreams we have as young people on the threshold of adulthood. I sure remember my high school years, and even had my own brush with Jock World in baseball... which doesn't even register on the applause meter when you're talking about America's true national pastime. I can still identify with the addictive qualities of sport, and by understanding any addiction I think we move our own ball forward in terms of consciousness. Enjoy. The movie is good, the book is outstanding.

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