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**Friday Night Lights**

**Book Rationale**

Bissinger, H.G. *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*. Reading, MA: Addison-  
 Wesley Pub., 1990. Print.

**Intended audience**

H.G. Bissinger, through the use of this novel attempted to and succeeded in accurately depicting an American town driven by the success of a high school football team.

The intended audience for this novel is high school students, college students, and adults. The book is a representation of a way of life, a depiction of true events, and a display of a community’s values. These events and values may become questionable at times, but the content is suitable for readers in the listed audiences.

**Plot summary**

It is 1988 in Odessa, Texas. Odessa is a terrible place to live and has been defamed by various reports of its high murder rate and vocational uncertainty. The demographics have also changed in the past few years. Whereas once the town was dominantly white, the black and Hispanic population has had an influx in recent years. Changes seemed to be the only constant in the small town of Odessa, but one thread ran through the town, holding it together through each change which occurred: football. To be more specific, high school football is what kept the community going. The residents of Odessa relied on the Permian High School football team’s success throughout the season, and expected the team to make the state championships yearly.

The reliance of the Odessa residents on the high school football team made the football players heroes. Thousands would pack into a high school stadium to watch the Permian High School Panthers dismantle a rival team. However, this reliance also meant high expectations. If the team was unable to perform, there would be outrage throughout the community. Thus, the coach was always under pressure, and so were the players. The author, H.G. Bissinger, introduces Boobie Miles, who strives to use football as his gateway into college. His uncle, L.V. Miles wishes for the same. However, soon after the great athlete is introduced, he is severely injured. Boobie Miles attempted to give his all despite the circumstances, but this would hurt him in the end. Boobie, in a preseason game that would not affect the Panthers’ regular season performance or record, trips mid-run and another player ends up falling on Boobie’s knee. His knee has been severely injured, and the doctors claim it will require surgery and physical therapy for Boobie to get back onto the field. Boobie’s uncle fears for Boobie’s fate, as Boobie is not academically talented, and football is all that he has.

The football season finally begins, and in the first game, the Permian Panthers are missing Boobie Miles who would normally start at the running back position. Don Billingsley takes his place, but cannot perform at a high enough level. Billingsley, after making crucial mistakes, is taken out of the game and replaced by Chris Comer, a black player. The racism present throughout Odessa is finally exposed here, when Billingsley uses a racial slur to define Comer while Billingsley displays his anger about being replaced. Don does not understand that his replacement was due to his own lack of natural ability, not Comer’s skin color. In fact, throughout Odessa, using racial slurs to refer to black people was socially acceptable. On top of discrimination, segregation was also present. Ector High School was essentially reserved for black and Hispanic students, while Odessa High School and Permian High School we composed of almost exclusively white students. The courts had even ordered the town to desegregate its schools, but change did not come. The only desegregation present occurred on a small scale and solely for the benefit of the football programs. Black athletes would transfer to Odessa and Permian High School to play football.

The Permian Panthers suffer a loss in the regular season, and suddenly Coach Gaines, the head coach, is surrounded by uncertainty. The need to win is so great that even one loss can throw the entire town into paranoia and fear. The town’s reliance on football and disregard for an academic education becomes present. A teacher makes it known that a significantly greater amount of funding is allotted to the football program than to actual academic subjects. While this would be well and good if the students were performing academically well, this is not the case. Students struggle in studies, barring a select few. Boobie Miles returns to the field after weeks of physical rehabilitation, but does not perform at the level he once did. People doubt Miles’ ability, but Boobie continues to try. Meanwhile, Panthers’ quarterback Mike Winchell, despite displaying a stellar performance throughout the season, is uncertain about his own ability, not knowing whether he can lead the team to a state championship.

A crucial game against a rival high school team, Midland Lee, is lost. This removes the guarantee of the Panthers advancing to a state championship, but does not remove all chance of advancing. However, the town is in outrage, and Coach Gaines instantly becomes the scapegoat of the entire predicament. Gaines very life is in danger, as the residents of Odessa will stop at nothing to make sure Gaines pays for handing the team a loss. However, after winning another game and a tie-breaking coin toss, the Panthers advance to the playoffs, and obtain an actual shot at the state championship. Boobie sits out the first playoff game, recovering from a surgery, and because he is shadowed by the new running back, Chris Comer. The Panthers advance to the state championship, where they lose to a violent and intimidating team from Carter High School. The seniors from Permian high realize that football, though making up the entirety of their high school lives, is not everything. The town may be looking to the future of the football team, but the seniors realize they have their own futures ahead of them, which will not be saturated by football.

**Possible Objections**

Racism

Segregation

Violence

Devaluation of education

**Why this book should not be banned**

Friday Night Lights is not just about the season of a high school football team in Texas. It is not about defaming the town or the football program. A critic writes, “the point of the book isn’t to run down something that is (to many people) glorious and turn it into something mundane.” (Franklin) It is the story of an entire town, its flaws, and its values. In fact, the novel correctly displays a multitude of similar towns in the same time period. The events which transpired in Odessa, Texas were not unique to Odessa. Contrarily, the beliefs the town held, and the way in which its residents acted were qualities shared by other high school football driven towns in the later 1980s. The entire intention was for the novel to display the true colors of one of these high school football driven towns, and expose all of its qualities, even if it meant depicting all the ways in which Odessa was flawed. To ban the book would be to censor a way of life and shadow true occurrences in an American suburban town. All the glory that a high school football program is met with should not be allowed to sheath the inevitable evils that go hand in hand with the sport.

A major objection to the novel is racism. The author, H.G. Bissinger, was a reporter, and traveled to Odessa to witness and document what a high school football town was really like. Events that transpired before his own eyes and things he heard with his own ears were not left out of his notes. Bissinger was able to experience firsthand what it meant to live in Odessa. A critic stated, “Racism is rampant, as is the casual use of the dreaded N-word, with black players openly acknowledged to be only good enough to play football and easily replaceable”. (Nande) The first occurrence of racism in the novel is evident through the words of an assistant coach from Permian High School football team. The coach calls Boobie Miles, a black player for the Permian Panthers, a “big ol’ dumb (racial slur)”, when asked what Boobie would be if he did not have football. Though valued for his athletic ability, Boobie Miles was not respected as a person. A racial divide still existed in the locker room of the Panthers’ football team, despite the organization being a colorless victory machine. A critic writes, “In the average Texan’s mind of the time, the only thing an African-American is good for is playing football.” (Ferry) The skin color did not seem to make a difference to the coaches when Boobie was on the field. But without football, the coaches, and many white members of the community, viewed the black players as inferior. Though it is made evident early in the novel that there is a hatred of black people by the white community in Odessa, only later in the novel is the black hatred of white people depicted. The Permian High School football team played Carter High School’s team in the state championships. Carter High School’s football team’s coaching staff and players were black, whereas there was diversity on the Permian sideline. Odessa had undergone desegregation on a very small scale when black athletes transferred to Odessa High School and Permian High School to play football. Thus, the only diversity Odessa experienced was limited to the football field. Carter High School’s fans were angered at the diversity of their opposing team, clearly holding the view that the black players should not play alongside the white ones. They express their unhappiness by mocking the black coaching staff and players on the Permian High School football team, calling them “oreos”, depicting a mixture of races they do not see fit.

This theme of racism spills over into segregation, which is very prominent in Odessa. In fact, before the transfer of black athletes to Permian High School and Odessa High School, schools were still racially segregation. Even in the late 1980s, with court ordered desegregation, Odessa, Texas did not take steps to mix racially. In reality, the town had an entire high school composed of solely minorities. Ector High School had a black and Hispanic population of over 90%, whereas Odessa High School and Permian High School had a white population of over 90%. Carter High School, the Panthers’ opponent in the state championship displays that segregation is present in other towns as well, as the entire Carter High School football team is composed of black players. The themes of racism and segregation are present because they were present in real life. The book’s objective was to reflect the real occurrences in Odessa, and thus should be left in the novel.

Moreover, the game of football is an intense sport. Not only is it physically demanding, but it is also very dangerous. Boobie Miles, the all-star running back for the Permian Panthers’ gets injured in a meaningless preseason football game. The damage sustained by his knee is so severe that he may never be able to play football at the same level again. The novel exposes football for what it really is: though a driving force for an entire town, also a dangerous endeavor. Boobie required surgery and will be physically lacking for the remainder of his life, solely resulting from another player falling upon his knee in a football game. Besides Boobie’s injury, the book also mentions fractures, vomiting before games, and the use of painkillers. The violence of the sport of football deserves to be left in the novel, as it depicts the dangerous circumstances the players expose themselves to, just for some glory.

Furthermore, a key controversy in the town of Odessa and in others like it is depicted in the novel, but can be difficult to see, as it is overshadowed by racial segregation. This controversy is the devaluation of education. A critic stated, “Education is neglected, blatantly sidelined in favour of furthering the ‘Permian cause’, corners are cut, mistakes and behaviour overlooked as long as they are important to Permian football.” (Nande) Students in Odessa, Texas are nothing if not football players. H.G. Bissinger notes, after hearing from a teacher, that the funding allotted for the Permian High School football program is far greater than the amount allotted for academics. This represents Odessa’s twisted view that education is not of importance. The underlying issue is not that the money is not allotted, but that students are not able to perform academically, and that no one seems to care that this is the case. Don Billingsley is a terrible student. He cheats on homework and does not care about his academic standing. However, Don is a hero. He is on the Permian Panthers football team, and thus he is respected, and other students wish to be him. In the future however, this will negatively affect him. Charlie Billingsley learned this the hard way. He realized that there is no guarantee that football lies in ones future. In fact, though he attended Texas A & M to play football, Charlie Billingsley realized he was “a whole lot more expendable in college”. There was no telling whether football would dominate the rest of one’s life or career. But the issue is not that Charlie will not play football, but that he cannot do anything else of value, as his education through high school was severely lacking. This same problem poses itself for Boobie Miles, who strives to be admitted to a college solely on his football talents, but after he is injured, the future looks grim. Without a sufficient education, there is no fallback plan.

The objective of the novel is to show the downfalls of a town like Odessa, Texas, and the novel succeeds in doing so. A critic stated, “Often sports books are dismissed as lightweight and “Friday Night Lights” is anything but. And in my recent re-reading of it, I was surprised by how little of “Friday Night Lights” actually took place on the field.” (Ennis) This is entirely precise. The novel depicts the devaluation of education as a danger for the youth of our nation. It portrays football as a violent and injurious endeavor. It presents Odessa as a racially segregated and discriminative community. Though these flaws may tarnish the picture people have of American towns driven by high school football, this book displays the true occurrences and values of such a society. H.G. Bissinger was threatened on multiple occasions for his accurate representation of Odessa, but stands by his words and his publication of them. The realism and informative aspect that the book contains renders it suitable for shelves.

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