

*Friday Night Lights*  
Reading Response Questions

Preface pp. xi-xiv

1. What nagging impulses compel author H.G. Bissinger to want to write about high school football?
2. Of all the towns in America, why does Bissinger decide to go to Odessa, Texas?
3. As Bissinger describes the drive into town from the outskirts to downtown, what sort of details does he mention? What do these details tell the reader about the kind of town Odessa has become?
4. How does his description of the Permian Panthers' football stadium contrast with the way he characterizes the rest of the town?
5. Bissinger sees his year in Odessa as a chance to learn not just about high school football, but also about other aspects of small-town American life. What other questions is he interested in finding answers to in Odessa?
6. How does Bissinger go about researching his subjects?
7. Bissinger says he found positive and negative consequences to Odessa's football-crazy culture. What were the positives and what were the negatives?

Prologue pp. 1-20

1. To gain the reader's interest, Bissinger prefaces the story with a scene from the middle of the season. In this way, he begins *in media res*, or "in the middle of things" (just like Homer in the *Odyssey*). He starts with his focus on running back Boobie Miles, who expected to star at running back for Permian before a knee injury sidelined him for most of his senior season. In his first paragraph, Bissinger uses a racial epithet to characterize the way Boobie feels he is perceived. Who is this racist attitude attributed to, and why do you think Bissinger chooses to include this language—which is so highly offensive—in the first paragraph of his preface?
2. Why is this Permian game against Midland Lee so important to Boobie?
3. Next, Bissinger introduces Jerrod McDougal. What simile does Jerrod use to describe the intensity of Permian games? What does this simile tell the reader about the importance Jerrod attaches to the games?
4. Describe how quarterback Mike Winchell feels on game day.
5. Why does Winchell have mixed feelings about being recruited by Brown, which is an Ivy-league school?
6. What is Ivory Christian's pre-game ritual, and what does this ritual tell the reader about his state of mind before the game?
7. How is linebacker Brian Chavez different from his teammates in terms of his attitude toward the game and his plans for the future?
8. By half-time, Boobie Miles is prepared to quit, because he believes he has been treated like a "guinea pig." Why does he feel this way?

9. As the preface ends with a Panther loss, what are some details Bissinger includes about reactions to the defeat to suggest the idea that Permian football mania has spun out of control in Odessa?

## PRE-SEASON

### Chapter 1 Odessa pp. 23-37

1. What happened in the early and mid-1920s that forever changed Odessa?
2. What evidence does Bissinger provide to support writer Larry McMurtry's description of Odessa as, "the worst town on earth"?
3. Why do some Odessa residents love their town in spite of its flaws?

### Chapter 2 The Watermelon Feed pp. 38-52

1. Find two quotes that illustrate Odessans' love for the Permian Panthers.
2. Why do some Odessans dislike billionaire businessman H. Ross Perot so much?
3. Describe some of the responsibilities of a Pepette (Permian cheerleader).
4. Do these duties seem appropriate to you? Would it seem strange to you if these same duties were applied to the cheering squad at our school?
5. Describe how Shawn Crow is treated by his teachers and Permian fans. Does this treatment seem appropriate to you for a high school athlete?

### Chapter 3 Boobie pp. 53-69

1. At the start of his senior season, James "Boobie" Miles sustains a serious knee injury that will require surgery and rehabilitation before he can resume play; he knows he may never play at the same level as before. What does his response to this injury tell the reader about the role football has assumed in his plans for his future? Is it healthy for a 17-year-old to stake all his hopes on playing professional sports?
2. Why is Boobie being raised by his uncle, L.V., instead of his own father? What is the relationship like between Boobie and L.V.?
3. Why does L.V. place so much importance on Boobie being successful at football?
4. Why are academics a challenge for Boobie?
5. Describe how the attitude of the white Permian coaches toward Boobie changes after Boobie is injured. What do you think about how the coaches talk about Boobie?

## THE SEASON

### Chapter 4 Dreaming of Heroes pp. 73-88

1. What effect did the death of his father (Billy Winchell) have on Mike Winchell?
2. In what ways is Don Billingsley like his father Charlie?
3. Charlie Billingsley says, "I got him to live through, and that's something special." What do you think the effect on Don is of his father trying to "live through" him?
4. Who does Don blame as he begins to pity himself because his own poor play results in his getting fewer opportunities to carry the ball at running back?

Chapter 5 Black and White pp. 89-110

1. Are Don Billingsley's attitudes about race in step or out of step with the other residents in the town of Odessa?
2. Bissinger quotes a former local principal who says this about Odessa: "There is no integration. There is desegregation. There is no integration in this community, the same as any community in America." Based on what Bissinger has included in the book this far, would you agree with this observation as it applies to Odessa? What about the principal's argument that this is also true about the rest of America?
3. Nate Hearn, Permian's only black coach in 1988, says, "When it comes time to play the game, we are a part of it. But after the game, we are not a part of it." What is Hearn referring to?
4. The author includes a number of passages in this chapter where he quotes Odessa's white residents directly using racist language. Is Bissinger right to include these quotes so the reader can get an honest, unsanitized understanding of the racist attitudes of some Odessans, or should the author have left these out because the language is offensive and hurtful to some readers?

Chapter 6 The Ambivalence of Ivory pp. 111-127

1. What is Ivory Christian ambivalent about and why is he ambivalent about it?
2. What has become Ivory's true passion at this point in his life?
3. Describe how the Permian coaches, including Coach Gaines and the trainer, Trapper, behave during the game against Marshall. Have they lost their perspective on the importance of the game or are they acting in an appropriate way?

Chapter 7 School Days pp. 128-152

1. Using Don Billingsley as an example, describe a typical pre-game school day for a Permian football player.
2. What impression do you get of the teachers at Permian High from this chapter? What do you think of the reasons they describe for the students' poor academic performance?
3. Why does Eddie Driscoll, who has the second-highest GPA in his class, feel like a second-class citizen at Permian?
4. Bissinger writes of one Permian parent, "...it was clear to him that girls had to 'dumb down' at Permian or else run the risk of being excluded from dating and parties because the boys considered them too smart." Is this social pressure on girls to hide their intelligence in order to be popular present here at our school?
5. How does the way Permian High school budgets money for sports vs. academics reflect its priorities?
6. Compare the importance placed on academics at Permian to the emphasis on learning and academic achievement at our school. Which approach do you think is better for teens and why?

Chapter 8 East Versus West pp. 153-172

1. Why has the Odessa High vs. Permian game come to be so important to Odessa High's fans?
2. Re-read the exchange on the sidelines between the trainer, Trapper, and running back Don Billingsley. Trapper's job is to ensure the players' health and well-being on the field. Based on this exchange, is he good at his job?
3. Analyze the comments in italics made by the Permian coaches the day after Permian stomps Odessa High 35-7 (p. 169). How does Bissinger use these as a means of indirect characterization of the coaches?

Chapter 9 Friday Night Politics pp. 173-193

1. Why do Odessans support George Bush (note: this is the current president's father)?
2. What is ironic about the warm welcome George Bush receives in Odessa?

Chapter 10 Boobie Who? pp. 194-207

1. What dilemma does L.V. face in deciding whether or not to allow Boobie to play against Abilene High? What does he ultimately decide to do?
2. What do the comments made by the Permian coaches about Boobie reveal about the coaches themselves? Why are they so down on Boobie?
3. How are Mike Winchell's and Boobie Miles' seasons going in opposite directions?

PUSH FOR THE PLAYOFFS

Chapter 11 Sisters pp. 211-232

1. Explain the metaphor Bissinger uses as the title of this chapter. How are the cities of Odessa and Midland like sisters?
2. What parallels does Coach Gaines see between Olympic swimmer Steve Genter and the 1988 Permian Panther football team?
3. In your opinion, should a high school coach compare his players to the type of extreme circumstances surrounding Steve Genter's Munich Olympic experience? What kinds of pressures might it place on the players?

Chapter 12 Civil War pp. 233-250

1. After the loss to Midland Lee, how do Odessa residents take out their frustrations on Permian's Coach Gaines and his family?
2. How do the attitudes reflected in Jerrod McDougal's comments about Japan echo the values he is learning as a Permian Panther?
3. Describe the injury suffered by Jaxon McDougal, Jerrod's brother, at the age of 12 on the football field. Should 12-year-old boys be encouraged to play a sport where this kind of injury is commonplace?
4. What "honor" had Jerrod received from senior football players during his junior year?

5. What historical allusion does Jerrod use to describe being a Permian player? What does this tell you about his perspective on the sport?
6. Are you surprised by his mother's response to the Midland loss? Have you ever known a parent to respond this way to a child losing at a sporting event?

Chapter 13 Heads or Tails pp. 251-264

1. Why is it so important to the coaches that the location of the coin toss to determine who goes to the playoffs remain a secret?
2. Describe the "rite of passage" Gary Gaines was subjected to by his father when he was in seventh grade. What is your opinion of how Gaines' father acted in that situation?
3. What has happened to Boobie Miles since he quit the team and had knee surgery?
4. What is your view of how his coaches treated him?

POST-SEASON

Chapter 14 Friday Night Addiction pp. 267-290

1. Consider the results of Coach Gaines' lashing out at his players during their 41-13 victory in the second round of the playoffs. What do the players do after the game? Could there be a link between the way they are treated by their coaches and how they treat themselves when left to their own devices?
2. What psychological tactics do the coaches resort to in their efforts to motivate the Permian players as the third-round game approaches? What is your opinion of these tactics?
3. Re-read Coach Belew's pre-game prep talk before the Irving Nimitz Vikings game. What arguments does Belew use to try to inspire the players to do their best? Do you think he is convincing? Why or why not?
4. How does Bissinger convey the feeling of intense pre-game excitement in the Permian locker room before the Nimitz game?
5. Jerry Hix and Daniel Justis are two former Permian players who Bissinger interviews about their reflections regarding Panther football. Compare and contrast their responses.
6. How has the phone call from a Texan Christian University recruiter changed Ivory Christian's outlook on football and his future?

Chapter 15 The Algebraic Equation pp. 291-312

1. What is the "no-pass no-play" rule?
2. How do teachers help Gary Edwards and other Carter Cowboys football players get around that rule?
3. What crisis develops in Will Bates' algebra II class for Gary Edwards?
4. What is your opinion about the way Carter's principal, C.C. Rousseau handles the problem?
5. How is the problem finally resolved?
6. What happens to teacher Will Bates after the crisis passes?

Chapter 16 Field of Dreams pp. 313-337

1. Why does Bissinger say the field during the Carter game will not be a "...field of dreams, but a field of nightmares" for Mike Winchell?
2. Consider the structure of the narrative in part III of this chapter. How does Bissinger alternate his focus between one paragraph/subsection and the next to build suspense in this crucial playoff game?
3. Why is Jerrod so dejected after the game? Hint: it's not just because of the final score.

Epilogue pp. 339-355

1. Describe the recruiting process that Derric Evans and Gary Edwards experience.
2. How might the experiences they have when they are being recruited contribute to the choices they make after the season ends?
3. What happens to Brian Chavez after he leaves Permian?
4. Jerrod McDougal?
5. Don Billingsley?
6. Mike Winchell?
7. Ivory Christian?
8. Boobie Miles?
9. High school sports are supposed to help students develop as individuals and team players so they can succeed in life. Who do you think was best served by the Permian football program? Who was worst served by his experience at Permian?

Afterward pp. 357-366

1. Were you surprised by what you learned about any of the players' lives 10 years after they left Permian?
2. What accusations does Bissinger say have been made against him since he wrote the book? Do you think any of these are fair? Why or why not?
3. Were there any positive results of the book in Odessa? What were they? Be specific.
4. Having read the book, do you believe Bissinger sensationalized events, as he is accused of by coach Randy Mayes, or is his retelling of the events of the 1988 season fair and accurate in your view?