

THE BOOK THAT INSPIRED THE NBC TELEVISION SERIES

# FRIDAY

A TOWN, A TEAM,

# NIGHT

AND A DREAM

# LIGHTS



**#1**

New York Times  
Bestseller

**H. G. BISSINGER**



(1)

## ODESSA

**I**n the beginning, on a dog-day Monday in the middle of August when the West Texas heat congealed in the sky, there were only the stirrings of dreams. It was the very first official day of practice and it marked the start of a new team, a new year, a new season, with a new rallying cry scribbled madly in the backs of yearbooks and on the rear windows of cars: GOIN' TO STATE IN EIGHTY-EIGHT!

It was a little after six in the morning when the coaches started trickling into the Permian High School field house. The streets of Odessa were empty, with no signs of life except the perpetual glare of the convenience store lights on one corner after another. The K mart was closed, of course, and so was the Wal-Mart. But inside the field house, a squat structure behind the main school building, there was only the delicious anticipation of starting anew. On each of the coaches' desks lay caps with bills that were still stiff and sweat bands that didn't contain the hot stain of sweat, with the word PERMIAN emblazoned across the front in pearly thread. From one of the coaches came the shrill blow of a whistle, followed by the gleeful cry of "Let's go, men!" There was the smell of furniture polish; the dust and dirt of the past season were forever wiped away.

About an hour later the players arrived. It was time to get under way.

"Welcome, guys" were the words Coach Gary Gaines used to begin the 1988 season, and fifty-five boys dressed in identical gray shirts and gray shorts, sitting on identical wooden benches, stared into his eyes. They listened, or at least tried to. Winning a state championship. Making All-State and gaining a place on the Permian Wall of Fame.



Going off after the season to Nebraska, or Arkansas, or Texas. Whatever they fantasized about, it all seemed possible that day.

Gaines's quiet words washed over the room, and in hundreds of other Texas towns celebrating the start of football practice that August day there were similar sounds of intimacy and welcome, to the eastern edge of the state in Marshall, to the northern edge in Wichita Falls, to the southern edge in McAllen, to the western edge in El Paso. They were Gaines's words, but they could have come from any high school coach renewing the ritual of sport, the ritual of high school football.

*"There's twelve hundred boys in Permian High School. You divide that by three and there's four hundred in every class. You guys are a very special breed. There are guys back there that are every bit as good as you are. But they were not able to stick it out for whatever reason. Football's not for everybody. But you guys are special."*

*"We want you all to carry the torch in the eighty-eight season. It's got to mean somethin' really special to you. You guys have dreamt about this for many years, to be a part of this team, some of you since you were knee-high. Work hard, guys, and pay the price. Be proud you're a part of this program. Keep up the tradition that was started many years ago."*

That tradition was enshrined on a wall of the field house, where virtually every player who had made All-State during the past twenty-nine years was carefully immortalized within the dimensions of a four-by-six-inch picture frame. It was enshrined in the proclamation from the city council that hung on a bulletin board, honoring one of Permian's state championship teams. It was enshrined in the black carpet, and the black-and-white cabinets, and the black rug in the shape of a panther. It was enshrined in the county library, where the 235-page history that had been



written about Permian football was more detailed than any of the histories about the town itself.

Of all the legends of Odessa, that of high school football was the most enduring. It had a deep and abiding sense of place and history, so unlike the town, where not even the origin of the name itself could be vouched for with any confidence.

### *Odessa . . .*

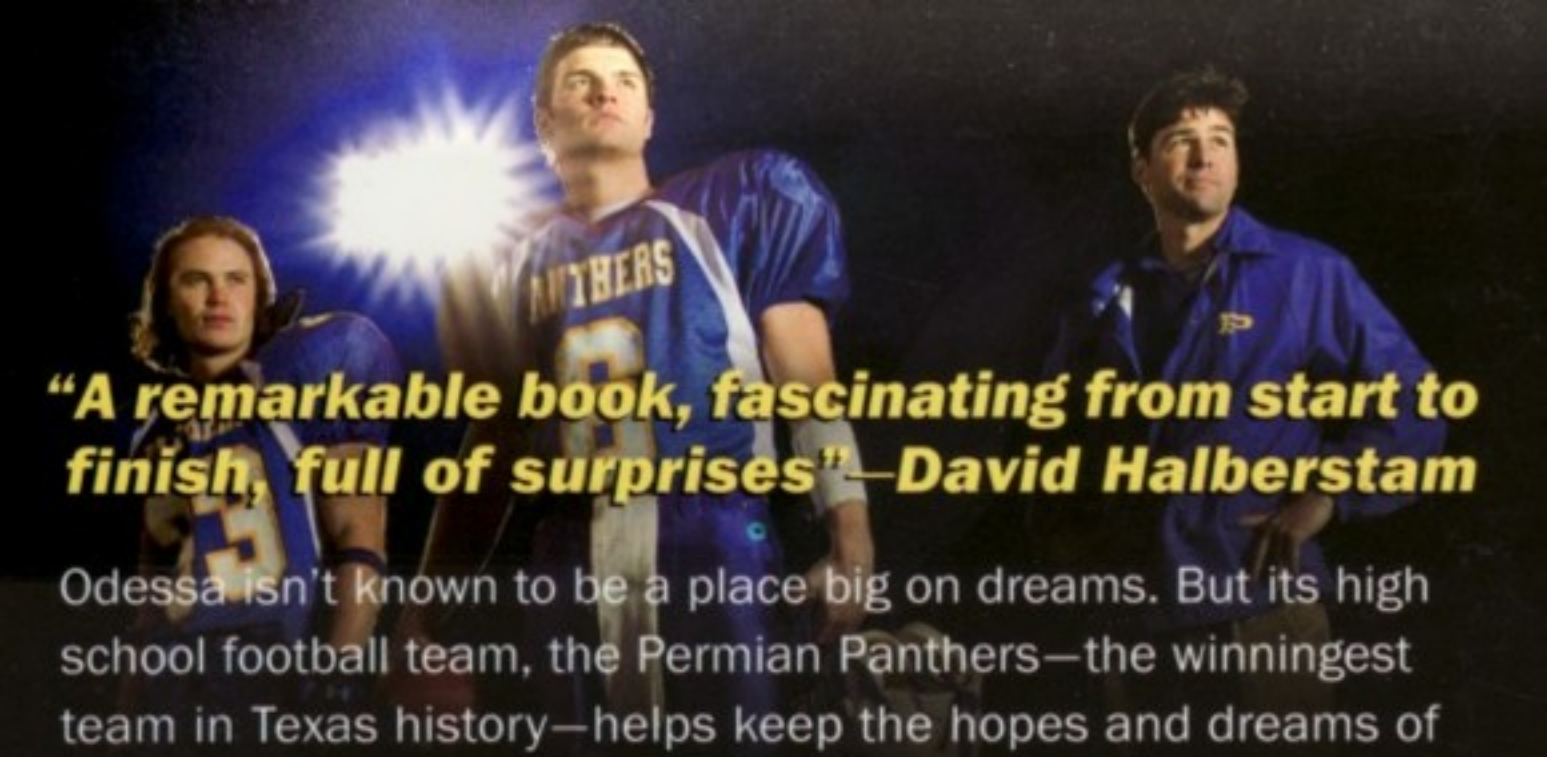
There had been no reason for its original existence. It owed its beginnings to a fine blend of Yankee ingenuity and hucksterism, its selling the first primordial example of the Home Shopping Network.

It was invented in the 1880s by a group of men from Zanesville, Ohio, who saw a great opportunity to make money if only they could figure out some way to get people there, to somehow induce them into thinking that the land bore bountiful secrets, this gaping land that filled the heart with far more sorrow than it ever did encouragement, stretching without a curve except for the undulating trough off the caprock where the once-great herds of buffalo had grazed for water. What Odessa lacked, and one look informed the most charitable eye that it lacked a fantastic amount, the speculators from Ohio would make up for on the strength of their own imagination. With fourteen thousand arid acres to sell, truth in advertising was not something to dwell over.

The Zanesville syndicate looked at all the best natural qualities of the country and decided to attribute them to Odessa whether they were there or not. Through brochures and pamphlets it conjured up a place with weather as wonderful as Southern California's and soil as fertile as that of the finest acre of farmland in Kansas or Iowa.

"Splendid cities will spring up all along the railroads that traverse the plains, and immense fortunes will be made there in a few years, in land business ventures, you





**"A remarkable book, fascinating from start to finish, full of surprises"—David Halberstam**

Odessa isn't known to be a place big on dreams. But its high school football team, the Permian Panthers—the winningest team in Texas history—helps keep the hopes and dreams of this small town alive. Every Friday night from September to December, when the Panthers play football, this West Texas town becomes a place where dreams can come true.

With frankness and compassion, H. G. Bissinger chronicles a season in the life of Odessa and shows how devotion to the team shapes the community and inspires—and sometimes shatters—the teenagers who wear the Panthers' uniforms.

## **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S #1 FOOTBALL BOOK OF ALL TIME**

**H. G. Bissinger** has won the Pulitzer Prize, the Livingston Award, the National Headliner Award, and the American Bar Association's Silver Gavel for his reporting. The author of the national bestseller *Three Days in August*, he has written for the television series *NYPD Blue* and is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*. He lives in Philadelphia.

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