

VOLUME XIV, NUMBER 4, FALL 2014

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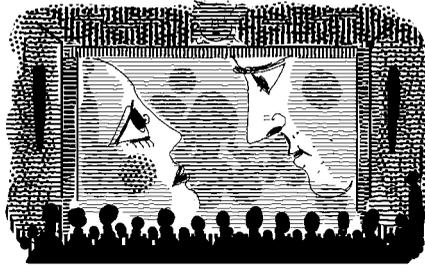
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Tolstoy in Texas

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I SPENT THE BETTER part of an evening arguing with a professor of literature about Tolstoy. My position was that Tolstoy is one of the greatest novelists who ever lived; the professor's was that Tolstoy's works are sexist, classist, and outdated. Later that night I had a strange but memorable dream:

Drifting alone through a party full of people I don't know and don't want to know, I am bored and ready to leave when suddenly I am accosted by the host, an imposing, gimlet-eyed figure with a long beard. "You can't go yet," he booms, "you haven't met everyone!" He then proceeds to introduce me to every guest, cook, bartender, and server in the place, not just by telling me their names but by sketching, with a few Zen-like strokes, the moral trajectory of their lives. The effect is transformative: instead of being stuck in a crowd of tiresome strangers, I am immersed in a sea of human souls as they must appear to the penetrating but compassionate eye of God. I stay at Tolstoy's party as long as I can before waking up.

Today I rarely argue about Tolstoy. Most people I meet, including professors of literature, would rather argue about long-form television series. Indeed, it is now an article of faith among the educated *literati* that the long-form TV series is the modern equivalent of the 19th-century novel. The trouble is, even the most celebrated of these series—*The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*—cannot hold a candle to their great literary predecessors. Their eye is not penetrating enough, and certainly not compassionate enough, to reveal the suffering and striving of every character.

And their fascination with vice all but blinds them to virtue.

There is, however, one notable exception: *Friday Night Lights*, an unpretentious but excellent series about a Texas high-school football team that aired on NBC between 2006 and 2011. *Friday Night Lights* may not rank with *Anna Karenina*, but it does work a kind of Tolstoyan magic on the fictional town of Dillon.

Friday Night Lights,
developed by Peter Berg.
NBC Universal Television.

You might ask how that is possible, given that *Friday Night Lights* is a network series, subject to old-fashioned censorship and punctuated by commercials. To the first point, it is true that this series lacks the explicit sex, graphic violence, and profanity found in most cable series. But like Tolstoy's novels, it manages to do quite well without these ingredients. To the second point, I agree that it would be painful to watch *Friday Night Lights* with commercials. But thanks to DVDs and streaming video, we don't have to.

The biggest drawback of producing for the networks is their definition of ratings success. During the first season of *Breaking Bad*, which appeared on the cable channel AMC, the audience averaged 1.2 million viewers. Five seasons later, that number had climbed to 5.4 million, and *Breaking Bad* was declared a hit—and a major cultural phenomenon. By contrast, *Friday Night Lights* was nearly canceled by NBC in 2008, because it was attracting a mere 6.2 million viewers (out of a total of 100 million).

Prose and Poetry

BEFORE IT WAS A TV SERIES, *FRIDAY Night Lights* was a book, a 1990 nonfiction bestseller by journalist H.G. Bissinger, about the Permian Panthers football team in Odessa, Texas. Fourteen years later it became a feature film, directed by Bissinger's cousin Peter Berg, and starring Billy Bob Thornton as Gary Gaines, the real coach of the Permian Panthers. Then in 2006 Berg created the TV series, which departs quite dramatically from both the book and the film. The main departure is in the show's attitude toward Texas. Bissinger's book is highly critical of racism and sports-related corruption in the flat, unlovely oilfields of Odessa, so it has few admirers in that city today. The TV series, by contrast, is beloved not only in the bluer and more scenic precincts of Austin (where it was filmed), but in the state's redder regions, too.

I hasten to add that this is not because *Friday Night Lights* avoids hard topics like racism and corruption. It does no such thing. In fact, it intertwines a great many hard topics—including religion, class, feminism, family dysfunction, and the war in Iraq—into the many stories it tells. And it does so more artfully than the book, which mostly alternates between dry reportage and blow-by-blow descriptions of football games. This is not to disparage the book. Without it, this series could never have been made. But the difference between them is the difference between prose and poetry.

Much of that poetry is cinematic, stemming from Berg's eschewal of the painstaking blocking and lighting needed for flawless, high-definition "eye candy." There's plenty of visual beauty in *Friday Night Lights*, but no



eye candy. Likewise, the actors did not rehearse or perform countless “takes” for an editor to splice into scenes. Instead, they ran through each scene without stopping, while being filmed by three small mobile cameras. Often they did this several times, improvising as they went. The best version was then given to the incomparable music director, W.G. “Snuffy” Walden, to create the soundtrack. (If you’ve ever wondered who is the best at matching songs with moods, here is your answer.)

Fortunately, this way of working relies more on talent than on money, so Berg and company were able to sustain it all five seasons. The result is a momentum that starts two-thirds of the way through the first episode and, like a rain-swollen Texas river, never quits.

Full confession: I am not a football fan. As the youngest and klutziest in a family of jocks, I rebelled early against sports in general, and football in particular. To be sure, I felt a certain loyalty to my hometown team when my older brother was the star fullback. But I’ve never been able to summon loyalty to a college or professional team. Forgive the blasphemy, but why should I feel loyal to a bunch of guys who are basically out for themselves, and whose ties to my community are tenuous at best? On a deeper level, why should any self-respecting community

allow itself to be held hostage by mercenaries whose arrogance and egotism often go to criminal extremes?

Why then do I and so many other non-football fans admire *Friday Night Lights*? The stock answer is that the show is not really about football. But that’s too easy. It is about football. Indeed, it is about the conflict—a veritable Greek *agon*—between the two sides of football: the one that speaks to America’s dreams and the one that conjures its nightmares.

Adults in Charge

THE DREAM SIDE IS THE RISE OF THE Dillon Panthers (and later the East Dillon Lions, a team from the wrong side of the tracks created as part of a school redistricting plan) from unpromising beginnings to glorious victories. The architect of these victories is Coach Eric Taylor (Kyle Chandler), the father of a bright but coddled daughter, Julie (Aimee Teagarden), and the surrogate father of several rough-edged football players. Among the Panthers and Lions we get to know best, only two—Jason Street (Scott Porter) and Landry Clark (Jesse Plemons)—have responsible, caring fathers. The other players’ fathers are either dead, absent, or unreliable.

It is clear that without the intervention of Coach Taylor, many of these young men would lose their way. Here we encounter the nightmare side of football: the cutthroat college recruiters who play on the insecurities of low-income players and their families; the dashed hopes of the injured and those who despite years of hard work do not make the cut; the insufferable egotism of celebrity players spoiled by a winner-take-all system; and the relentless—at times merciless—pressure from the community to win at all costs.

In *Friday Night Lights* this pressure is expressed by talk-radio host “Slammin’ Sammy” (David Cowgill), whose constant patter is the Texas equivalent of a Greek chorus. It is also embodied in Buddy Garrity, the owner of a local car dealership who is the team’s biggest booster. Played by Brad Leland, who was raised in Plano and a member of the Plano Wildcats when they won the state championship in 1972, Buddy is about as Texas as you can get. He is also one of several characters who eventually learn the difference between (as one player puts it) “what’s right for the team and what’s right.”

Amid all this, Eric Taylor holds his own because he is that rarest of beasts in the menagerie of contemporary popular culture: a virtuous white man who is neither a cartoon hero nor a parson of political correctness. Bless

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his bleeding liberal heart, Alan Alda would not be right for this role. Like his best players, Eric Taylor is fierce, proud, hot-tempered, and intensely competitive. Indeed, he embodies that part of the human psyche known as *thumos*, or spiritedness. Yet unlike his players, Taylor understands that he must master his *thumos*, or else become its servant. In other words, he is an *adult*.

So is his wife, Tami Taylor (Connie Britton). The *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott wrote recently that in American culture “the supremacy of men can no longer be taken as a reflection of natural order or settled custom.” This is hardly news, but more striking is Scott’s next observation—that “in doing away with patriarchal authority, we have also, perhaps unwittingly, killed off all the grown-ups.” Needless to add, we have also killed off all the happily married couples, at least the heterosexual ones. At one point *Friday Night Lights* was reported to have more female fans than male. Given its portrait of a faithful, companionate marriage that actually works, this should come as no surprise.

Britton played the coach’s wife in the 2004 film, a role that (in her words) consisted of “sitting on a hardwood bleacher getting splinters in my ass and cheering.” So when Berg asked her to play Tami, her initial reaction was “You’re out of your mind.” But Berg reassured her: “We’ll create a character. We’ll give you a job. We’ll give you dimension.” And they did. As the guidance counselor and then principal of Dillon High, Tami focuses on the collateral damage caused by the town’s football obsession: the neglect of academics, the binge drinking, the exploitation of young women. These may be preachy liberal causes, but when blended with Tami’s yellow-rose-of-Texas charm, they don’t come off that way.

Ill-Defined Ideals

RECENTLY I TRIED TO CONVINCING A group of college freshmen that *Friday Night Lights* is vastly superior to their favorite juvenile fare. Some agreed, but as they noted, what makes the series distinctive is its adult perspective. The Taylors are not the only ones trying to help the troubled youth of Dillon. When they succeed, it is also because of other adults, like Corrina Williams (Liz Mikel), the widowed nurse who is a moral anchor to her son, the gifted but volatile “Smash” (Gaius Charles); Billy Riggins (Derek Phillips), the bumbler who struggles to protect his younger brother, the wayward but soulful

Tim (Taylor Kitsch); and Lorraine Saracen (Louanne Stephens), the grandmother who raises shy, moody Matt (Zach Gilford) when his mother abandons him and his father goes off to fight in Iraq.

It is no accident that Matt Saracen is the one pondering the difference between “what’s right for the team and what’s right.” He is one of a handful of young characters who must grow up too fast, shouldering the burden of caring for adults who can no longer care for their young ones or themselves. In Matt’s case, his grandmother develops Alzheimer’s. In the case of Vince Howard (Michael B. Jordan), a talented athlete in trouble with the law who joins the team in Season Four, his mother, Regina (Angela Rawn), a frail crack addict, needs his help.

Vince’s story grows even more poignant when his long-absent father, Ornette, gets out of prison and tries without success to assume the paternal role. Played brilliantly by Cress Williams, this character is essential to the final two seasons. Yet in all the published chatter about *Friday Night Lights*, Ornette is almost never mentioned. I suspect this is because he is too real, and his floundering attempt to compete with Coach Taylor for Vince’s respect is too painful a reminder of the failure of countless American men, black and white, to fulfill their own ill-defined ideals of manhood.

Ornette is not exactly redeemed in the end, but neither does the series give up on him. The butt-kicking skills he learned on the street and in prison come in handy when defending Vince from a murderous gang-banger; and the sharp racial edge of his resentment toward the coach is eventually blunted. Most amazing, the same TV series that invites our sympathy for this no-account black convict also invites it for the biggest redneck in Dillon, Buddy Garrity.

In the 2004 film, Brad Leland played a stereotypical booster, a type he himself calls “a total ass.” This changed when he joined the cast of the TV series, because, as he explains, nobody likes playing a stereotype. “From the very beginning,” he told an interviewer in 2011, “I knew that [Buddy] had been the quarterback at Dillon, and they won a state championship, and he grew up his whole life there, and he had established a good business, and he had a nice family and kids, so I knew that this guy isn’t some evil booster. This was a guy that really cared about the community and really cared about his family and just has weaknesses just like all of us do.”

If Tolstoy spoke Texan, that is how he would put it.



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