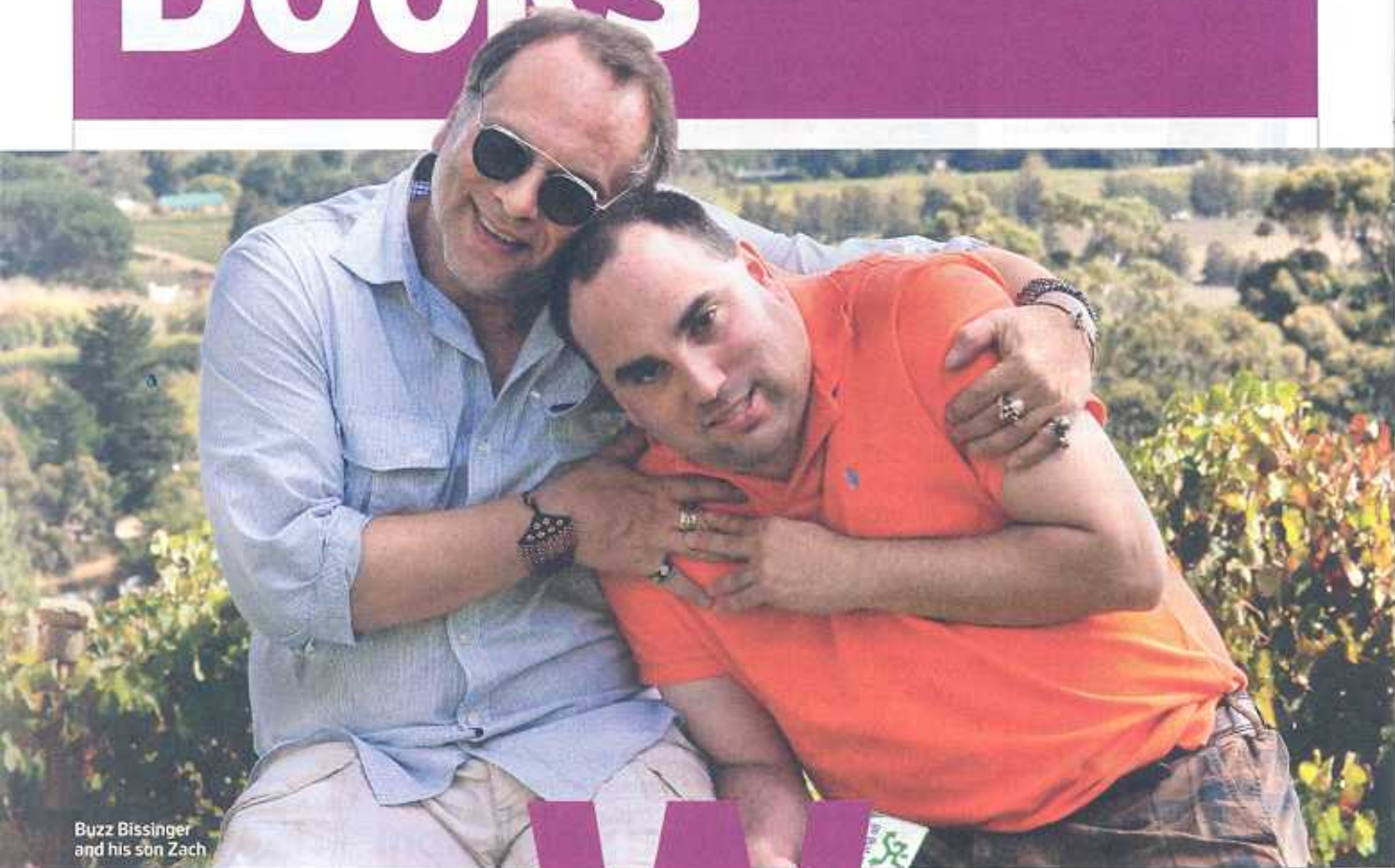


Books



Buzz Bissinger
and his son Zach

TRUE STORY

A Father & Son Heartbreaker

Friday Night Lights author **Buzz Bissinger** returns with a moving memoir about his mentally handicapped son, as well as an e-book about troubled *FNL* star Boobie Miles.

By Rob Brunner

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WITH HIS metal-studded leather jacket, brown cowboy boots, and hoop earring, Buzz Bissinger oozes macho swagger as he cruises around downtown Philadelphia in his black BMW convertible, weighing in on recent novels and muttering curses at an errant pedestrian. Bissinger, 57, is best known as the author of the 1990 high school

football blockbuster *Friday Night Lights*, which has sold nearly 2 million copies and spawned a movie and a TV series (a movie based on the TV show is also reportedly in the works). And while he's relaxed and amiable over the course of a recent afternoon, he is also, it must be said, famous for his volatile personality, which is best experienced on his filter-free Twitter feed. "I get frustrated easily, I get panicked easily, I get anxious easily, I get depressed easily, and there are these moments where I will fly off the handle," he says. "But I'm not one persona. People are multidimensional. I'm very caring. I can be very generous. I can be very soft."

Both sides of Bissinger's raw-edged personality are on display in a pair of new books: *Father's Day* (in stores May 15),

which chronicles a cross-country road trip he took with his mentally disabled adult son, Zach, and *After Friday Night Lights*, a 40-page e-book about his ongoing relationship with *Friday Night Lights*' most enduring and troubled figure, James "Boobie" Miles. Bissinger is a loving father and an intensely loyal friend, and though his tenderness and generosity animate the books, he's also fearless when it comes to exposing his darker moments: the disappointment that his son will never be normal, the feelings of jealousy and insecurity, the scary rages that sometimes erupt in Zach's presence. "I felt what made this worthwhile is that I wanted to be honest," he says, now sitting in the living room of his tastefully decorated house in the leafy Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia. "And some of that honesty is painful. I love Zach to death, but I do get angry easily. I am career-obsessed. Whatever is in the book is the way I am, and the fear is that people will think I'm an a--hole, as opposed to a father who loves his son but is really trying to find some sort of common ground."

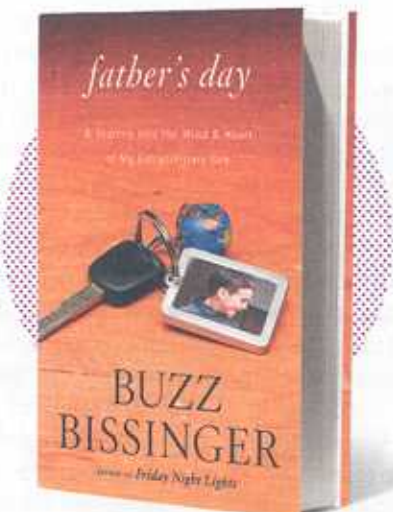
Bissinger's twin boys, Zachary and Gerry, were born on Aug. 20, 1983, 13 and a half weeks premature, each weighing less than two pounds. Gerry had a three-minute head start, and those extra moments of oxygen meant everything, defining the lives of the boys and their parents (Bissinger and their mother divorced; he's since remarried twice and has a third son, who's 20 years old). Gerry has thrived, getting an Ivy League degree and settling into a teaching career. Zach wasn't so lucky. The oxygen deprivation he suffered at birth caused brain damage that left him borderline mentally retarded. He has a remarkable memory for names and dates, and he holds down part-time jobs bagging groceries and working in the mailroom at a newspaper. But he'll never live independently, will never drive a car, will never be able to comprehend much abstract thought. Bissinger has always adored Zach, but he had

trouble connecting. "I never had a real conversation with him," he says. "There was no common ground. He didn't watch TV, he didn't like sports, he spent a lot of time in his room by himself. I felt guilt and I felt frustration. This is my son, I love my son, but I can't get through." The cross-country trip was a chance to draw Zach out, to spend two weeks alone with the son he so desperately wanted to know better.

So they set out in a minivan, just the two of them, tracing a path through places they'd once lived: Milwaukee, L.A., and Odessa, Tex., where they had spent a year while Bissinger researched *Friday Night Lights*. It was also an opportunity to broach a subject that had long gnawed at him: How much does Zach really understand about his condition? "I was surprised by how much he knew," says Bissinger. "When you hear your child say, 'My brain isn't right,' you do wonder, should I have brought it up? It's really crushing to hear."

In person, Zach is friendly and engaged, keen to answer questions but clearly unable to process much of

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what's being discussed. Over lunch at a downtown Philly bar, he talks about his day at work ("mail and stuff"), his weekend plans (bowling), and, of course, that pivotal road trip. Earlier Buzz had described Zach's warm personality, which has a way of drawing people in. "He has an incredible buoyancy. He's not competitive, he's not jealous, he's not burdened by being overly ambitious. He's happy for people. I mean, how many of us are really happy for people? We're professionals. We all live in a world of schadenfreude. He's remarkable. He really is."

Zach isn't Bissinger's only tricky father-son relationship. Over the years, he has come to think of Boobie Miles as something like a fourth child. They have nothing in common, and yet their lives will always be connected. Bissinger was there when the budding gridiron star with a rough upbringing and an excess of talent blew out his knee, effectively ending his football career and shattering his dreams of college and the pros. He was there when Odessa turned against the 18-year-old kid, sneering racist insults and dismissing him as washed-up. And he documented it all in *Friday Night Lights*, which brought Miles an unexpected celebrity that lingers to this day (rapper Big K.R.I.T. even scored a hit this year with a song titled "Boobie Miles").

Bissinger's other new book, *After Friday Night Lights*, is about how Miles' life has turned out since the split-second injury that—much like Zach's life-rending three minutes—changed everything. "People have always asked me, 'Why don't you write a sequel to *Friday Night Lights*?' " says Bissinger. "Well, I don't want to write a f--ing sequel. But my relationship with Boobie was different. I have what I think is an interesting, complex, important personal relationship with Boobie. I wanted people to know what had happened to him. Maybe someone out there wants to help him."

Bissinger and Miles stayed in touch after *Friday Night Lights* came out, and their friendship started to

deepen. "He began to call me, and I would talk to him, and there was a real desperation in his voice," Bissinger says. "I guess sometimes I thought he was playing me, but he didn't know where else to turn. He didn't have any money, he was living in crappy apartments, and he was getting evicted. Maybe it started out of guilt. He says, 'What would the book have been without me?' I mean, he's right." Today Bissinger and Miles are remarkably close, talking on the phone regularly. "It sounds corny, maybe, but love does crop up in weird places," says Bissinger.

Now 42, Miles lives in Kermit, Tex., where he works maintenance on oil rigs. He's in a good place, Bissinger says, after years adrift, including some time in jail. Bissinger has helped him out financially since *Friday Night Lights*, giving him more than \$60,000, and he's also sharing the profits from the e-book with Miles. "He's fundamentally a good man—kind of a gentle giant," says Bissinger.

When you listen to the author talk, it's hard not to draw parallels between Boobie and Zach, these two decent, damaged guys whose lives turned sideways in a flash, both



bound to a complicated father figure who tries to do the right thing by them without ever being certain what that might be. In *Father's Day*, Bissinger describes fatherhood as "what was vital...the best part of me." Whatever challenges Bissinger faces with Zach and Boobie and his own thorny emotions, he has come to accept things as they are. "Maybe what I learned the most is, what really is character?" he says at one point. "Is it how smart you are? Is it accomplishment? Is it how much you've accrued? To me, character is taking what you have and making the most of it." ■



(From top) NBC's *Friday Night Lights*; Bissinger with James "Boobie" Miles



Our Critic's Take

Karen Valby weighs in on *Father's Day*, Buzz Bissinger's unflinching account of the epic cross-country road trip he took with his son Zach.

Buzz Bissinger, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Friday Night Lights*, is the father of twin sons, only one of whom suffered brain damage that forever sealed crucial parts of him off from the world. (Zach can understand, for instance, that 9/11 is an important anniversary, but he still called Bissinger to wish him a "happy 9/11!") At 24, Zach, who bags groceries and will likely bag groceries

his whole life, is kind, generous, and accepting of his own 8-year-old comprehension skills.

But Zach is a mystery to his father. So, Bissinger invites him on a road trip that will take them to every place they have ever lived together. *Father's Day* is his gorgeous and brutally honest account of their adventure—an erratic father too eager to connect, a genial, detached son with

a savant-like skill for map reading. At a Six Flags outside St. Louis, Zach persuades his dad to go on a 153-foot heart-stopper of a bungee ride called the Dragon's Wing. The four-page description of their death-defying drop, in which father and son cling in terror and joy as they fall from the sky, is one of the most beautiful metaphors for parenthood I have ever read.

Occasionally Bissinger interrupts the flow with clinical tangents, like the horrifying treatments once inflicted on premature babies and a history of

savantism. I'm guessing these bits offered Bissinger a chance to reset his emotional barometer, but I always found myself anxious to get back to the story. *Father's Day* seems like a wrongheaded title, chosen by a marketing department for its muscular sentimentality. As much as this is a book for parents, who know well the crushing vulnerabilities of the job, it is also a story for grown children who understand what it means to love an imperfect parent. Would that we were all as forgiving as Zach. **A**