James Baldwin: Scars remain

By James Neff
Staff writer

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. — "I was not able to be called nigger," says writer James Baldwin. "If you called me nigger, you had to kill me. People always called me nigger, so you can see the result."

You can see one result on his face, a scar on the tip of a nose flattened by fights.

Another result cannot be seen with the eyes. It is a fury and frustration that once compelled Baldwin to write in 1972: "It is not necessary for a black man to hate a white man, or to have any particular feelings about him at all; in order to realize that he must kill him."

Today, at first, he seems a different James Baldwin. Gone is his bodyguard, a fixture in the 1960s, when death threats against black leaders were acted out with chilling regularity. His long-time bodyguard, Tony Maynard, was imprisoned on a murder charge.

Today, this questing writer — who has written 19 books, plays and novels (five were best-sellers) and who has lived in Harlem, France, Istanbul, Africa and elsewhere — is now living in Bowling Green and teaching two fall classes in black studies at Bowling Green State University.

Beneath the surface, however, he is the same old Jimmy. College life has not made him soft. He has not mellowed.

Today, Baldwin believes, black Americans are as oppressed as they were two decades ago. The civil rights movement hasn't spelled progress for blacks.

"I don't ever feel that it moved," he says. "Unemployment is just as high as ever, there's a whole new generation in the streets ... I felt it could move. I don't think that it really has."

Take a look at his recently published sixth novel, "Just Above My Head." It revolves around a young gospel singer from Harlem who gradually awakens to his homosexuality and to the complexities of race and love.

It is a story of incest, rape, prostitution, murderous thoughts, bitter racial frustrations and unreleased hostility toward whites; Baldwin clearly is warning America once again.

Baldwin glides up the stairs and into a classroom. He takes off his trench coat and his blue beret and adjusts the short green scarf hanging unknotted around his neck. Under the soft, dark outlines of his European-cut slacks and shirt, Baldwin seems at once sleepy and alert.

At this class — composed of 50 juniors and seniors, about half whites and half blacks — Baldwin shows a videotape of a lecture he delivered at Bowling Green last spring.

"The leaders of this country treat the people with stunning contempt," Baldwin is saying on the tiny screen. "What has been offered black people in the past 10 years is elaborate emasculation. They make the effort to integrate without really doing so ...""The misery I grew up in (Harlem) was spread out. Now it's piled high (in projects). If I sound harsh, it's because I will not see you for a while, and I don't want to leave any lies.

"Now what am I trying to say? I'm asking the impossible. I want you to be better than you are.

"The world is on the edge of something. If there's any moral energy in the West, it is only in this country. No where else. The only hope is here, not in Holland, France or Portugal. Only this country has endured the blood marriage.

"The poor white, who lynch our brother and sister, is worse off. We (blacks) know the trap we're Continued on Page 6