Bradley, right, shares a high five with brother Bobby after being told his novel had made the Washington best-seller list.

By SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH
Associate editor

In the late 1970s John Ed Bradley was the star center on the LSU football team. Today, the Opelousas native’s first novel, Tupelo Nights, is on the Washington best-seller list.

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he door opened and a young man wearing a baseball cap jammed backward on his head breezed in to give his older brother the good news.

"The book is on the Washington best-seller list," Bobby Bradley said in even tones. An instant of stunned silence was followed by a beaming smile and an exclamation as brother John Ed Bradley felt the impact of his first novel, Tupelo Nights, hitting a best-seller list. The brothers clasped hands in shared exuberation, and, after that, Bradley's conversation was punctuated with an occasional whoop, a grin and a fist punching the air.

At 29, Bradley has attained what every writer dreams of. Readers like his book. It's a best seller. Future books will be eagerly awaited. And a novelist is what he has always wanted to be more than anything else. More than playing pro football. More than being a newspaper reporter. More than writing movie scripts or television scripts or plays.

"I never thought it would be a best seller," he said. "I'll be honest. I never thought anybody would read it." Yet he knew that it was selling well in New York and Washington, and a friend who owns a bookshop in Washington told him that his book is the best-selling book in his shop right now.

Bradley lives in Opelousas in an apartment in the back yard of his mother’s home. He's under contract with The Washington Post to write three or four major pieces a year. Sports Illustrated asked him to write a short story; he's working on that — as well as on his second novel. Esquire excerpted Tupelo Nights and wants him to write a major article.

Tupelo Nights, published April 27 (20,000 in the first printing), is already in its second printing, has been published in England ("writing of and about the South are real popular in England; they loved it") and will be available shortly in Japan. Paperback rights will be auctioned June 7, with several publishers eager to obtain those rights.

Bradley feels a little overwhelmed by all the attention he’s getting — and a little embarrassed.

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I sort of don't want anyone to read it. I feel like people are going to think, 'Man, you're a real pervert.' I'm embarrassed when people tell me I'm John Girlie. I want to stand on a mountain and shout, 'I'm not John Girlie!'
Bradley put a lot of himself into Tupelo Nights. "So much of the book is painful and sad," Bradley said. "I hate to go back and read it. Some of it hurts a little bit. I don't think I like John Girlie that much. He's got a streak of cowardice. Indecisive. Yet he has a good heart."

There aren't any tupelo gum trees in the cemetery in Opelousas, though they figure prominently in the book. "I put them there for a reason," Bradley said. "In winter they are haunting with their swollen trunks. They're spooky looking. I wanted Charlie to say that the roots grew and strangled people in the graves," he added.

After he had lived at home and worked at Texas Eastern for a while, "I sent my resume to the Washington Post, along with samples of my writing," he said. "I had written some sports pieces for the Morning Advocate and Louisiana Life."

"I was rebellious and angry. I felt trapped in this town. Writing for the Post made me see that people in Nevada and California feel the same way," he said. "I didn't want to be a newspaper man. I never did. I wanted to write. They [thePEARL] sent me out on the road. I sketched a word picture of his journalistic work, somewhat awed by the experience. "You're reporting by phone from Vegas to Washington. Thomas Hearns goes down in the third round, yet you have to write 12 inches. So you make it up, and then the next morning you see it in print, and it looks great!"

None of that slaving over a hot typewriter to get every word exactly right. What he was making up was not the events but the background and atmosphere — those things that make the reader feel like he's witnessing the event — exactly what a creative writing graduate should be best at.

Bradley wrote a major piece for the Post that ran in March, just after the inauguration of Louisiana's new governor. "The Ballad of Buddy Roemer," he said, because "I got tired of picking up the Post and seeing articles about rogue politicians in Louisiana. I wanted to write something positive about the state," and this change in the political scene seemed to him worth writing about.

Bradley seems to be at another point.
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It's time to move on from _Tupelo Nights_, to grow in his writing. "I'm going to be 30 in a few months. _Tupelo Nights_ was started when I was a kid," he said. "I want to finish the second book and write some big pieces for magazines."

Several members of the Bradley clan have a literary bent, Bradley said. He speculates that they all got their love of reading from their father.

"My father was a great reader. I think he would have enjoyed the book. He would have been able to see what was real and what was fiction."

"I called him from Washington the morning of May 24 (last year) and told him I had the manuscript of my book in my car and was on my way home to see him. I wanted to show him my book. That night I got the call telling me he had died," he said, tears welling in his eyes.

_Tupelo Nights_ is likely to remain in Bradley's life for some time. He's been approached by "one group which wants to do _Tupelo Nights_ as a play either on or off Broadway, then make a film of it." But he doesn't want to rework the book...