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At the time of her death Thursday, Anna Nicole Smith was involved in a paternity suit over her 5-month-old daughter.

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Anna Nicole Smith's life, and death, is a tabloid tale

By **JEANNIE KEVER** and **CLAUDIA FELDMAN**
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Anna Nicole Smith, the Houston-born pop culture phenomenon who raised bubble-headed fame to an art form, died Thursday after collapsing in a Florida hotel room. She was 39.

Cable television immediately launched blanket coverage of Smith's tabloid-ready life: Playboy model and topless dancer, marriage to a man 60 years her senior and the ensuing battles over his money, the death of her 20-year-old son in September, just days after the birth of her daughter in the Bahamas.

"She was a celeb who always seemed on the verge of disaster," said Matthew Felling, media director at the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.

That was part of her appeal.

Smith collapsed at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, Fla., and was rushed to a hospital. Edwina Johnson, chief investigator of the Broward County Medical Examiner's Office, told the Associated Press that an autopsy will be done today.

But the lack of answers did nothing to stop the speculation.

Smith had earlier reported losing 69 pounds and was a spokeswoman for the weight-loss supplement TrimSpa.

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She and the company were named earlier this month a class-action lawsuit over their marketing of the supplements. Last month, the Federal Trade Commission announced TrimSpa would pay \$1.5 million to settle allegations that the company's weight-loss claims were unsubstantiated.

Smith's story had it all: big hair, big breasts, big money and big tragedy. She had her own reality television series for four seasons — *The Anna Nicole Show* on E! — and also appeared in a Houston courtroom during a nasty years-long battle with her stepson, E. Pierce Marshall, over her late husband's multimillion-dollar estate.

That took her to the U.S. Supreme Court last winter, where, by all accounts, she charmed the justices.

'Oblivious to anything'

Even in an age of unprecedented celebrity worship, most people who are famous have some reason for acclaim — a talent for sports, or acting, or even great beauty.

Not Smith. "She was known for abject cluelessness. She seemed charmingly innocent — she was oblivious to anything," said Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University. "How much of that was an act — who knows? If she had behaved differently, her celebrity might have lasted a week or two. Somehow, her fame took on a life of its own."

So the Anna Nicole Smith bobblehead shot up from \$20 to more than \$100 in bidding on eBay in the hours after her death, a testament to the spooky powers of celebrity.

And Lisa Nowak, the astronaut who only hours earlier had been the object of wall-to-wall coverage, was suddenly yesterday's news. "She must be thanking the fates," Thompson said. "Anna Nicole completely knocked her off the radar."

But the attention paid to Smith drew blistering reviews from some cultural critics.

"This is someone who was an exhibitionist, who led a life that was self-destructive," said Elayne Rapping, professor of American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "She was famous for being extremely strange."

That didn't stop the flow of condolences from people whose lives connected, at least tangentially, with Smith's.

"She was a dear friend who meant a great deal to the *Playboy* family and to me personally," *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner said.

Most made mention of the fact that Smith left behind a

5-month-old baby, Dannielynn Hope, born Sept. 7 in the Bahamas. Her 20-year-old son, Daniel, died a few days later while visiting in her hospital room. His death was eventually attributed to a lethal combination of methadone and two anti-depressants.

She spent time with the lawyer she claimed was the baby's father, Howard K. Stern, in the Bahamas last year, but a former boyfriend has filed a paternity suit, claiming he is the father.

Small-town girl

Smith was born Vickie Lynn Hogan in Houston on Nov. 28, 1967; her family soon moved to Mexia, south of Dallas. There she apparently spent most of her time dreaming of escape.

"It's a real small-town story," said David Bates, now executive director of media relations at the University of Texas Health Science Center, who was director of the library system that served Mexia in the early 1980s.

"She was just an ordinary skinny brown-haired local girl, but I do remember she was brighter than most of the kids we got," Bates said.

"Skinny," "brown-haired" and "bright" were not adjectives that would be applied to Smith during her rise to public prominence.

She married Billy Wayne Smith, a cook at a local chicken restaurant where she worked as a waitress, in 1985. She was 17, and he was 16. Their son, Daniel, was born the next year.

They separated in 1987 and Smith moved to Houston, working first at a Wal-Mart and later as a topless dancer.

She was selected Playboy's Miss May in 1992 and was Playmate of the Year in 1993.

By then, she had dropped "Vickie" in favor of "Anna Nicole" and astute observers found her more voluptuous than the usual centerfold.

Smith was on her way to bigger and better things as well. She met J. Howard Marshall II, a Houston oilman 63 years her senior, in 1992. They married two years later.

Marshall was in a wheelchair for the wedding at the White Dove Wedding Chapel in northwest Houston, but he told guests — all from Smith's side of the family — that he would be happy if he could spend his money on Smith.

That, presumably, included the 22-carat engagement ring.

A few months after the wedding, Marshall signed over power of attorney to his son, E. Pierce Marshall, and his fortune was put in trust.

Pierce Marshall and Smith quickly were battling over guardianship of the ailing millionaire. After Marshall's death in 1995, a court hearing over whether Marshall should be buried or cremated — won by Pierce Marshall, who had his father cremated — was the first of many.

Lengthy court battle

For the next 11 years, Pierce Marshall and Smith fought over the estate in courts in Houston, Dallas and Los Angeles. In May, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a California court — presumably more sympathetic to Smith — should have jurisdiction, rather than a Texas court.

Pierce Marshall died in June 2006. But even with Smith's death, the fight won't be over.

"Somebody will seek to step in on her behalf and continue the litigation," said Rusty Hardin, who represented Pierce Marshall during the 5 1/2 -month trial in Houston, which ended in March 2001.

Pierce Marshall's family issued their own statement Thursday: "Our family was shocked by the untimely death of Anna Nicole Smith. We wish to express our sympathies to her family in this difficult time," the statement said. "Out of respect to her friends and family we will reserve comment on the litigation at this time."

The larger question remains: Why did we care about Anna Nicole?

Garth Jowett, a professor of communications at the University of Houston, offers a thought.

"Our own lives are so humdrum we want to live vicariously through other people," he said. "We want to have some kind of vicarious experience through the lives of others. And those we choose have strong sexual auras. They're titillating."

Chronicle reporters Lana Berkowitz, Tara Dooley, Lisa Gray, Bill Murphy, Louis B. Parks, Eyder Peralta and Mary Vuong contributed to this report.

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