

The short, sad, sordid life of Anna Nicole Smith

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The untimely death of 39-year-old Anna Nicole Smith has provided another excuse for the US media to do its worst. Smith's death last week in a Florida hotel room gave television anchors and reporters in particular a green light, summed up by CNN's Larry King pronouncement on his nightly talk show: "The death of Ann Nicole Smith—it's the number one story around the world tonight!"

Crass journalistic headlines and phrases abounded, such as MSNBC's "Boobs and bucks," and "Trash, Cash—and a Life Lived on Her Terms." Whether dead or alive, Anna Nicole Smith can be counted on to yield a limitless potential for exploitation.

A mere one day after she died, a graphic video of emergency medical technicians trying to revive Smith surfaced on the Internet after Splash News & Picture Agency reported that rights to the footage of paramedics working on the unresponsive woman sold for more than \$500,000. The news outlet had screened the video to potential media buyers at their Los Angeles headquarters before the tape turned up on Friday morning on a popular German television channel and was posted by Liveleak.com.

There is no end in sight to the media circus. Postmortem issues involve the custody of Smith's five-month-old daughter and the future of her potentially considerable estate. After the death of her second husband, J. Howard Marshall—a Texas billionaire oil tycoon—in 1995, Smith waged a court battle over Marshall's estate with his now-deceased son. After a California federal court award of \$474 million was overturned, her case was then revived by the Supreme Court which ruled that Smith had the right to make a claim on Marshall's \$1.6 billion estate. The Bush administration had directed the Solicitor General to intercede on Smith's behalf in a desire to expand federal court jurisdiction over state probate disputes.

The tragic death of Smith's 20-year-old son Daniel last September places Smith's infant daughter, who now stands to inherit Smith's possible fortune, at the center of conflicting paternity claims. Even before her death, Smith's former boyfriend Larry Birkhead, an entertainment reporter, and her attorney-turned-lover, Howard K. Stern, both claimed to be the child's father. Within hours of Smith's death, Prince Frederic von Anhalt—husband number nine of nonagenarian Zsa Zsa Gabor—came out of the woodwork to stake his own claim and chivalrously stated that "there could be easily 20-30 men" who could have fathered Smith's child.

Although a birth certificate currently lists Stern as the baby's

father, Birkhead's lawyer has demanded that DNA be taken from Smith's corpse to resolve the paternity battle. Von Anhalt said he will sue if custody is awarded to either Stern or Birkhead. Adding to the mess, Anna Nicole's sister, Donna Hogan, alleges that Smith froze late-husband Marshall's sperm and may have used it to get pregnant. The hope is that whomever gets the child gets the goose that will lay the golden egg.

Why was Anna Nicole Smith a celebrity? She had no significant talent—she couldn't sing, dance or act as far as one knows. 'Sex symbols' like Marilyn Monroe, with whom Smith has been compared and Smith compared herself, left behind a body of work that continues to resonate with intelligence and genuine sensuality. Moreover, Monroe, who was highly cultured, married a playwright who was a well-known leftist.

Smith, on the other hand, was essentially famous for being in the media—for being famous.

Born in 1967, she grew up Vickie Lynn Hogan in Mexia, Texas, raised by a single mother, a deputy sheriff. Mexia, about 80 miles southeast of Houston, is a working class town of 6,900 with a median family income of less than \$30,000, according to the 2000 US Census. Once home to 35,000 residents after a 1920s oil boom, today the town's largest employers are Mexia State School, a facility for the mentally disabled, the local hospital and the school district.

Smith dropped out of school after being expelled from the 11th grade. She then worked as a cook and a waitress, marrying 16-year-old Bill Smith in 1985. She was 17. Their son Daniel was born a year later and the marriage soon broke up. Working in a strip club in Houston, she met the 86-year-old Marshall in 1991 when she was 23. She married him three years later. The year before their marriage, in 1993, Smith was *Playboy* magazine's Playmate of the Year.

About her second husband, she is quoted as saying: "Nobody has ever respected me and done things for me and loved me. So when Howard [Marshall] came along, it was a blessing. He is the only person in my life who does not care about what other people say about me. He truly loves me and I love him for it." This could well be true—who knows?

Besides making vast sums in the oil business, Marshall had taught at Yale Law School. During their union, Smith was hospitalized for an overdose of alcohol, Vicodin and Xanax. Marshall died in August 1995. The court battle between Smith and Marshall's son, E. Pierce Marshall, over the \$1.6 billion estate

began within weeks. Now E. Pierce Marshall and Smith are both dead, but the legal battle will continue.

In 2002, E! Entertainment commissioned a “reality” television show built around the star who liked “lying in bed, watching television and shopping.” In most episodes, Smith, who was by then seriously overweight, appeared drunk or medicated. The show lasted two years, after which Smith became a spokesperson for a diet drug called TrimSpa and started a column for the tabloid rag, the *National Enquirer*. According to MSNBC, rumors floated about earlier this month that she and TrimSpa were being sued for misleading claims about the diet pills.

Another low point for Anna Nicole was her appearance at the 2004 American Music Awards, during which she introduced a musical performance with slurred speech and lewd behavior.

This week, a newspaper published two photographs on its front page of Anna Nicole lying fully clothed in bed with the Bahamian immigration minister who had approved her application for permanent residency in that island country. There is no doubt that the media will continue to unearth unappetizing material.

Her enhanced physical attributes and exuberant personality, which seemed sincere, perhaps brought her initial media attention, but another element entered into the subsequent fascination. Vicariously and recklessly, the media recognized early on that this was someone chronically spiraling out of control, who could be counted upon to generate scandal and controversy. Its relationship to her, and in part the public’s, was that of a rubbernecking driver to an accident. Here was a sex symbol as a car crash.

The media and the public’s relations to certain celebrities contain both love and hate. The media fawned over Anna Nicole to her face and scoffed at her behind her back. She was built up as the American dream girl, long-legged, blonde and buxom, and derided as an uncultured, backward gold-digger. Her thirst for celebrity made her very obliging and she was always met more than half way by an insatiable media.

Smith was the fitting sex symbol of the 1990s, a culturally stagnant and empty decade. An ersatz, media-invented figure whose principal skill was a relentless ambition and determination to “make it”—one can think of more than one popular singer and performer who rose to prominence in those years who fits that description.

She was a “personality” without personality—an apt symbol of the Clinton decade of reformism without reform. And as such, if it hadn’t been her, it would have been someone else. She was picked up and used by a mass media that had been tabloidized, during this time the *National Enquirer* scandal sheet became a legitimate media outlet (during the O.J. Simpson trial in particular). These were the years when *People* magazine and innumerable ‘infotainment’ shows came to the fore, when news programs became virtually indistinguishable from gossip segments and reality television shows of the most voyeuristic variety cropped up like mushrooms after the rain. This was the decade, above all, of the manufactured sex scandal that almost brought down a twice-elected president.

Coming from socially and culturally disintegrating small-town America, Smith was more or less an empty vessel. Personal difficulties with prescription medication and diet drugs kept her in

the limelight as the media alternately promoted her and tore her down. She was manipulated by a media for whom celebrity watching, especially when it involves sex and scandal, is a fixation, as well as a diversion in a polarized society. When Larry King proclaims her death to be the world’s top news story, he is not being facetious or insincere. It is the kind of news that he and his well-paid colleagues find most stimulating.

As for the “star” herself, who was reputed by friends to be basically sweet and generous, the fame and money that came her way from her tabloid existence was soul-destroying and added nothing positive to her life. “There are only two tragedies in life: one is *not* getting what one wants, and the other is *getting* it,” remarked Oscar Wilde. And what about the infant daughter starting life in a fishbowl as the object of mostly assorted hucksters and lowlifes?

In the midst of the remorselessness with which the media is making a meal out of her death, one comes across the occasional hand-wringing. In articles such the *International Herald Tribune*’s “Anna Nicole Smith: Why did we watch? The answer isn’t pretty,” Smith is tarred as a “dope-addicted floozy” who “sold photographs of her son and newborn in the hospital room where he died to *Touch* magazine; even now, video of her Caesarean section is available on YouTube.” The piece concludes that her “fame is as sad and shallow in death as it was in life, just as much of a tawdry compact between her and us.” This, coming from the real villains in the story—the media and entertainment apparatus.

To put things into perspective, Thinkprogress.org tallied up the minutes spent on the media’s coverage of Anna Nicole Smith the day after her death versus its reporting of the Iraq war: “NBC’s Nightly News devoted 14 seconds to Iraq compared to 3 minutes and 13 seconds to Anna Nicole. CNN referenced Anna Nicole 522 percent more frequently than it did Iraq. MSNBC was even worse—708 percent more references to Anna Nicole than Iraq.” All in all, not a pretty picture.



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