

Author 'Tommy' Thompson dies

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Author Thomas "Tommy" Thompson, the non-fiction writer whose first novel "Celebrity" topped the best-seller lists for 16 weeks this year, died early Friday of liver cancer. He was 49.

Thompson, who also penned the 1977 best-seller "Blood and Money" about a sensational murder trial in his home state of Texas, had known he was ill for about six weeks, his publisher said.

The lanky writer had been in a coma for several days and died about 3 a.m. at St. Vincent's Hospital, said spokeswoman Nancy Mirone. Robert Lantz, his agent of 15 years, and two college-age sons, Kirk and Scott, were at his bedside.

Thompson first was admitted late this summer after an attack of hepatitis. Doctors diagnosed cancer and he was readmitted Oct. 23, she said.

"He knew he was very ill but he was absolutely determined to beat it. Everybody played that game. Thank God it was very fast," Lantz said.

"It seems to me he was a part of my life for so long. We were very, very close. I loved that man," Lantz said. "He was full of life ...

he had just reached the peak of his plans and career."

Thompson was working on a novel about Las Vegas as well as an account of the ongoing Utah murder trial of Mark Francis Schreuder, charged in the shooting death of his millionaire grandfather. In addition, he was developing a screenplay of "Celebrity" for an NBC TV mini-series, said Marian Rosenberg, head of the West Coast office of Thompson's publishers, Doubleday and Sons.

The book describes the effects of star status on three Texas men. In a magazine interview published this month, he defined celebrity stature as "when you can't even go to the bathroom without having a couple of bodyguards to protect you from your subjects."

"I don't consider myself a celebrity," said Thompson, who owned homes in Los Angeles and Malibu. "I'm a celebrity only when it's necessary to be one. When I have to sell a book, I drop privacy ... A true celebrity, I suppose, is a person who goes on the Johnny Carson show when he has nothing to sell."

Thompson's other books

include "Serpentine" (1979) about the bizarre career of convicted murderer Charles Sobraj; "Lost" (1975); "Richie" (1973), and "Hearts" (1971). He also wrote the screenplay for last year's TV movie "Callie and Son."

A non-denominational memorial service is planned Monday at First Presbyterian Church in Beverly Hills. Thompson requested cremation, Lantz said.

"If the Lord says it's my time to go, I can't complain. I've already done everything twice," he told Houston Chronicle society columnist Maxine Messenger earlier this month. "If I can make it for six months, I can finish this book. I have so little left to do."

Ms. Rosenberg recalled Thompson as "a real Texan -- a big man with a big heart." Lantz's New York associate, Irv Schwartz, termed him, "a wonderful writer, a wonderful human being."

Thompson was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1933 and earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin. He joined the Houston Press and at 23 became city editor, youngest at an American

metropolitan daily at the time, said Doubleday spokeswoman Suzanne DeVito.

He moved to Life magazine in 1961 and held a variety of jobs, including Paris bureau chief.

He explained his 1972 resignation: "I feel like I've written all the magazine articles I want to write. I just want to live my life as I want. I want to write books and have nobody to answer to."

However, Thompson contributed occasional Life articles when the magazine was revived, including a cover story on Elizabeth Taylor.

Thompson said he wrote about 10 pages daily, not always with ease.

"In writing fiction, I was really having to dip into my own well and I had never been there before," he once said. "I had never encountered the awful terrors that I would guess all novelists do."

Heather Kirkpatrick, an attorney for Doubleday, termed Thompson, "one of the most outstanding researchers. He was a pleasure to work with ... He knew what was required for his publications to be legal and he had it."

"Blood and Money" was billed as the true story about the mysterious death of Houston socialite Joan Robinson Hill and the efforts of her vengeful father, Ash Robinson, to initiate prosecution against her physician-husband, John Hill. It sparked three lawsuits.

Hill's second wife, Ann Kurth -- whose account of the case was the basis for the NBC mini-series, "Murder in Texas" -- lost her \$3.75 million libel action in which she claimed Thompson's book wrongly portrayed her as a "sex bomb." Robinson's \$20 million suit against Thompson is pending. A police officer's suit was dismissed.

"Blood and Money" won the Edgar Allan Poe award of the Mystery Writers of America. Thompson also won the National Headliners Award for investigative reporting and a Sigma Delta Chi medalion for magazine writing.

His works have been translated into 14 languages and there are 4 million copies in print. Ms. DeVito said.