New Orleans-born writer
Truman Capote, 59, dies

LOS ANGELES (UPI) — Truman Capote, the bluntly opinionated socialite-author of such best-selling books as “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” and “In Cold Blood,” died Saturday. He was 59 years old.

Capote was found dead at the mansion of close friend Joanne Carson, the second wife of television star Johnny Carson, in the exclusive Bel-Air section of Los Angeles, police Cmdr. William Booth said.

A cause of death had not been determined late Saturday, and an autopsy was scheduled for Sunday.

The author, who was to celebrate his 60th birthday next month, had been a guest at the home since Thursday and Ms. Carson “was planning a birthday party for him,” homicide Lt. Edwin Henderson said.

Ms. Carson was going to wake Capote shortly before noon for a swim when she noticed he did not look right, Henderson said.

“She noticed his color was pale, she felt his forehead and noticed it was cool and attempted to find a pulse, but couldn’t find one,” Henderson said.

There was medication in the room where he was found dead, but police said they did not know if any drugs were involved in the death of the author, who has freely acknowledged having had bouts of alcohol and drug abuse.

“Detectives and coroner’s investigators are at the scene, although we have absolutely no evidence that foul play was involved,” Booth said.

Capote considered himself a peer above peers among living U.S. novelists. He made this known in the summer of 1980 during an interview when he was asked what he felt

(See CAPOTE, 21A)
Truman Capote in file photo

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was no end goal.

There are three or four writers left -- in my generation in this race and I have this feeling that I am going to win," he said.

He was in his mid-60s at the time and he spoke slowly in a sing-song cadence.

Capote, who was born in New Orleans on Sept. 30, 1924, to a former Miss Alabama, became an overnight success with the publication of "Other Voices, Other Rooms." Other books followed. In 1951 he was in Moscow, where he wrote what he called "a failure of the imagination," and now he says that the only prizes Norman wins are for that same kind of writing. "I'm glad I was out of some small service to him," he said.

Capote's snipe at Mailer was a continuation of a years-long feud with contemporary writers. Of Mailer he said: "Norman was never a good novelist. He was a very, very good literary critic though he has some foolish ideas. His really strong talent was for reportage. I like him as a person, he is a very good writer but he was miscast in that role of novelist-filmaker."

He also was unable to conceal his ill-feeling toward Gore Vidal. "Gore's idiotic lawsuit against me has truly cost me a lot of money but I don't have any harsh feelings about Gore," Capote said. "I think Gore Vidal is a man with a first-rate mind who, if he used it as an essayist and critic where he genuinely excels, would be an important figure in American cultural life instead of being a peripheral and mediocre novelist."

During the interview he was asked if he still felt that a Jewish "literary Mafia," as he once put it, controlled the book-publishing empire. "Well, time passes," he said. "There was a time, that all publications were edited and controlled by Jewish intellectuals and Jewish tycoons and they therefore over a period of 15 years pushed for Jewish writers. I never thought of it as a conspiracy, rather a kind of camaraderie that said, 'At last we're going to push every Jewish writer and Saul Bellow is going to win a Nobel Prize and Arthur Miller and Norman Mailer will get Pulitzer Prizes year after year.'"

He said all this has changed. "They tried to make a hero of Philip Roth but he's a very uneven writer," he said. "They lost their hero, (J.D.) Salinger."

During middle age Capote was often heard lecturing to college students or appearing on talk shows like "The Andy Williams Show" and "The Tonight Show." After publishing "In Cold Blood," he began drinking and in 1977 he told a college audience in Maryland he was an alcoholic.

Capote wrote in the May 1982 issue of "People" magazine of his drug abuse, saying he once was a patient of Dr. Max Jacobson of New York City, whose license was revoked for improper prescription of amphetamines.

"Ostensibly he was giving me vitamin injections," Capote wrote, "but actually they also had amphetamines in them."

Capote, who frequented New York's in vogue in his early days, was a part of that colorful society of such social luminaries as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Lee Radziwill, C.Z. and Winston Guest and Klaus and Martha "Sunny" von Bulow.

He had homes on New York's Long Island and in Switzerland and California but preferred New York City as a permanent home. "It's like living in Forest Lawn (cemetery)," Capote said of Southern California. "There is no intellectuali life, only going to the studio and coming from the studio. San Francisco has a very dramatic life, but it is one of the most provincial cities in the world. It's like a carousel, one sees the same people over and over in about 10 days."

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While Paris is very boring, Rome is