

CROWN NEWS

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*Doctors took her cells without asking.
Those cells never died.
They launched a medical revolution and a multimillion-dollar industry.
More than twenty years later, her children found out.
Their lives would never be the same.*

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS

By **REBECCA SKLOOT**

"Science journalist Skloot makes a remarkable debut with this multilayered story about 'faith, science, journalism, and grace.' . . . Recalls Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family* . . . A rich, resonant tale of modern science, the wonders it can perform and how easily it can exploit society's most vulnerable people." —PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (starred review)

"Writing with a novelist's artistry, a biologist's expertise, and the zeal of an investigative reporter, Skloot tells a truly astonishing story of racism and poverty, science and conscience, spirituality and family driven by a galvanizing inquiry into the sanctity of the body and the very nature of the life force." —BOOKLIST (starred review)

"Equal parts intimate biography and brutal clinical reportage, Skloot's graceful narrative adeptly navigates the wrenching Lacks family recollections and the sobering, overarching realities of poverty and pre-civil-rights racism. . . . Skloot's meticulous, riveting account strikes a humanistic balance between sociological history, venerable portraiture, and Petri dish politics." —KIRKUS REVIEWS (starred review)

"This distinctive work skillfully puts a human face on the bioethical questions surrounding the HeLa cell line. . . . Full of dialogue and vivid detail, this reads like a novel, but the science behind the story is also deftly handled." —LIBRARY JOURNAL (starred review)

"This is an extraordinary book, haunting and beautifully told."
—ERIC SCHLOSSER, author of *Fast Food Nation*

"Skloot's book is wonderful—deeply felt, gracefully written, sharply reported."
—SUSAN ORLEAN, author of *The Orchid Thief*

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS (Crown; February 2010), by Rebecca Skloot, tells the rich, enthralling story of Henrietta Lacks, the forgotten woman behind one of the most important tools in modern medicine, and of Lacks's descendants, many of whom feel betrayed by the scientific establishment.

Born in 1920 in Clover, Virginia, Henrietta Lacks was a poor tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors. In 1951, she developed a strangely aggressive cancer, and doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital took a tissue sample without her knowledge. She died without knowing that her cells would

become *immortal*—the first to grow and survive indefinitely in culture. HeLa cells, as they are called, were essential to developing the polio vaccine. They have aided in the development of in-vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene mapping, and have helped us to better understand the workings of cancer and innumerable viruses. Even today, HeLa is the most widely used cell line in labs worldwide, bought and sold by the billions. If you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, they would weigh more than 50 million metric tons—more than a hundred Empire State Buildings.

After learning about the HeLa cell line in high school, Rebecca Skloot became consumed by curiosity about the woman behind the cells. During the decade it took her to chase down and chronicle this remarkable story, she journeyed from state-of-the-art scientific laboratories to the tobacco fields of southern Virginia to East Baltimore, where the Lacks family lives today. She spent years winning the trust of Henrietta's daughter, Deborah, who longed to know more about her mother and to better understand the science behind her cells, which often seemed more like science fiction. With this book, we too become immersed in the story of the Lacks family, and are shocked to discover that Henrietta's husband and children did not find out about her "immortality," or the enormous profits her cells had generated, until more than twenty years after her death, when scientists investigating HeLa began using blood samples from her family in research without informed consent. The family had grown up surrounded by preaching, faith healing, and voodoo; suddenly they were plunged into a world of arcane-sounding science, wrestling with feelings of pride, betrayal, and fear. While biotech companies had made millions selling HeLa, many of Henrietta's descendants could not even afford health insurance.

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS marks the debut of an outsize new talent in narrative nonfiction. Rebecca Skloot brilliantly weaves together the Lackses' story—past and present—with the story of the first culturing of HeLa cells, the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, and the birth of bioethics. She combines investigative reporting, crystalline science writing, and riveting narrative. The result is a book that leaves as indelible an impression as Henrietta's cells.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REBECCA SKLOOT is an award-winning science writer whose articles have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *Discover*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and elsewhere. She is a contributing editor for *Popular Science* magazine and has also been a correspondent for NPR and PBS. A former vice president of the National Book Critics Circle, she is on the faculty at the University of Memphis, where she teaches creative nonfiction, and she blogs at Culture Dish, hosted by *Seed Magazine's* science blogs. Skloot has an undergraduate degree in biomedical science from Colorado State University and an MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Pittsburgh. She lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

ABOUT THE BOOK

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS

By Rebecca Skloot

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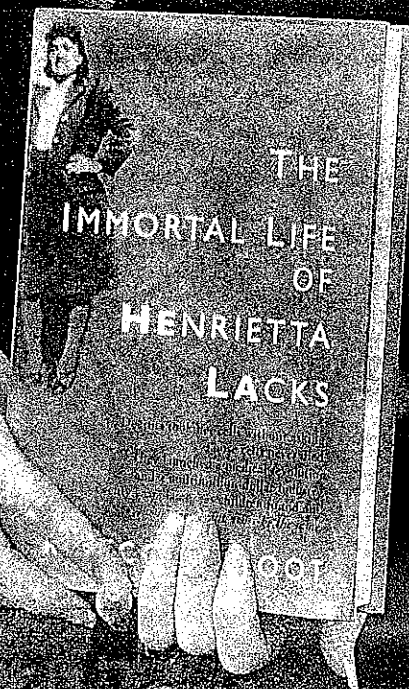
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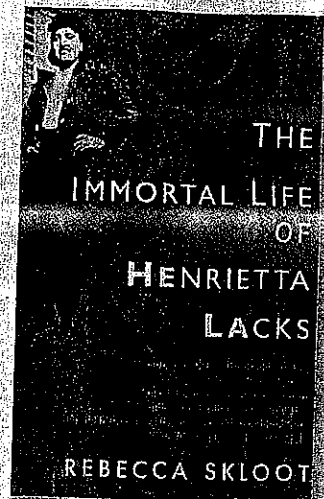
Rebecca Skloot,
author of *The Immortal
Life of Henrietta Lacks*



Life Unending

BY SARAH F. GOLD

Rebecca Skloot found a story of immortality and faith in a young woman's tissue sample.



Henrietta Lacks was an accidental medical heroine. The black, 31-year-old mother of four died of cervical cancer in Baltimore in 1951. But before her death, doctors took cervical tissue samples that proved to be medicine's holy grail—Henrietta's cells (known as HeLa) were the first ever to survive in the laboratory, and the cells reproduced ad infinitum, providing material for medical research to be done outside the human body.

It was the story of this unknown woman that Rebecca Skloot set out to write when she began her M.F.A. thesis in creative nonfiction writing at the University of Pittsburgh. The result is an impressive debut book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, to be published by Crown in February, and it is much more than the story of Henrietta and her miraculous cells. A mystifying phone conversation with Henrietta's passionate youngest child, Deborah, hinted at a bigger story—one touching on race, poverty, medical progress, bioethics, and, most unexpectedly for the skeptical science journalist, faith.

Skloot's gifts as a writer and student of science weren't apparent early on. During a recent visit to New York from Tennessee, where she teaches writing at the University of Memphis, Skloot says: "I was a troublemaker. The first time I got suspended I was in second grade." She failed her first year of high school because "I just didn't show up. It was a boredom thing."

An experimental school finally provided the freedom and challenge Skloot needed, and in only one year, she completed all four years of high school.

Six years later, at Colorado State University, Skloot still "had no interest in writing whatsoever. I was going to be a veterinar-

ian." But thanks to an academic quirk at Colorado State, she was able to take a writing class to escape the foreign language requirement. "I completely fell in love with it. So I just started taking writing classes every semester."

Skloot, 37, acknowledges the strong impact that her father, Floyd Skloot, has had upon her both as a person and a writer. Author of the celebrated memoir *In The Shadow of Memory*, Skloot wrote poems about his daughter from the moment of her birth. "I have these very vivid memories of things I couldn't possibly have remembered," she recalls, "because I read about them all my life."

Skloot devoted 10 years to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and its road to publication was a tortuous one that exemplifies both the worst and the best an author can experience. "I'm on my third publisher, W.H. Freeman, folded, and she got out of her contract with a second because she and the editor had a radically different vision. By this point, Skloot was an established science journalist and book critic, and her agent, Simon Lipskar at Writer's House, was able to auction the book, with Crown the winner."

The book was orphaned twice more at Crown. "I ended with my editor now, Rachel Klayman, who had been at Free Press when they were bidding on it [at auction], so she knew the book already and she was excited about it," Skloot says. The excitement continues: *O* magazine has bought first serial rights; the book is a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers title for spring 2010 and *Self* magazine's February title of the month.

It's tempting to believe someone has been looking out for Skloot. According to Deborah Lacks—with whom Skloot bonded closely—her mother's spirit lives on in her cells and guided Skloot from the very beginning.

Be that as it may, there is a more-than-incidental congruity between Skloot's own story and that of Deborah Lacks, who is more central to the book than Henrietta herself. Whether it is Skloot's father recording her life in poetry or another daughter's desperate need to learn about the mother who died when Deborah was too young to remember her, both embody a basic human need—to know and record our family stories.

"Even though I'm not a religious person," Skloot says, "I've come to feel like much of this story has to do with fate, including the fact that I ended up writing it."



Rebecca Skloot credits her father, Floyd, for helping her develop a writing voice.

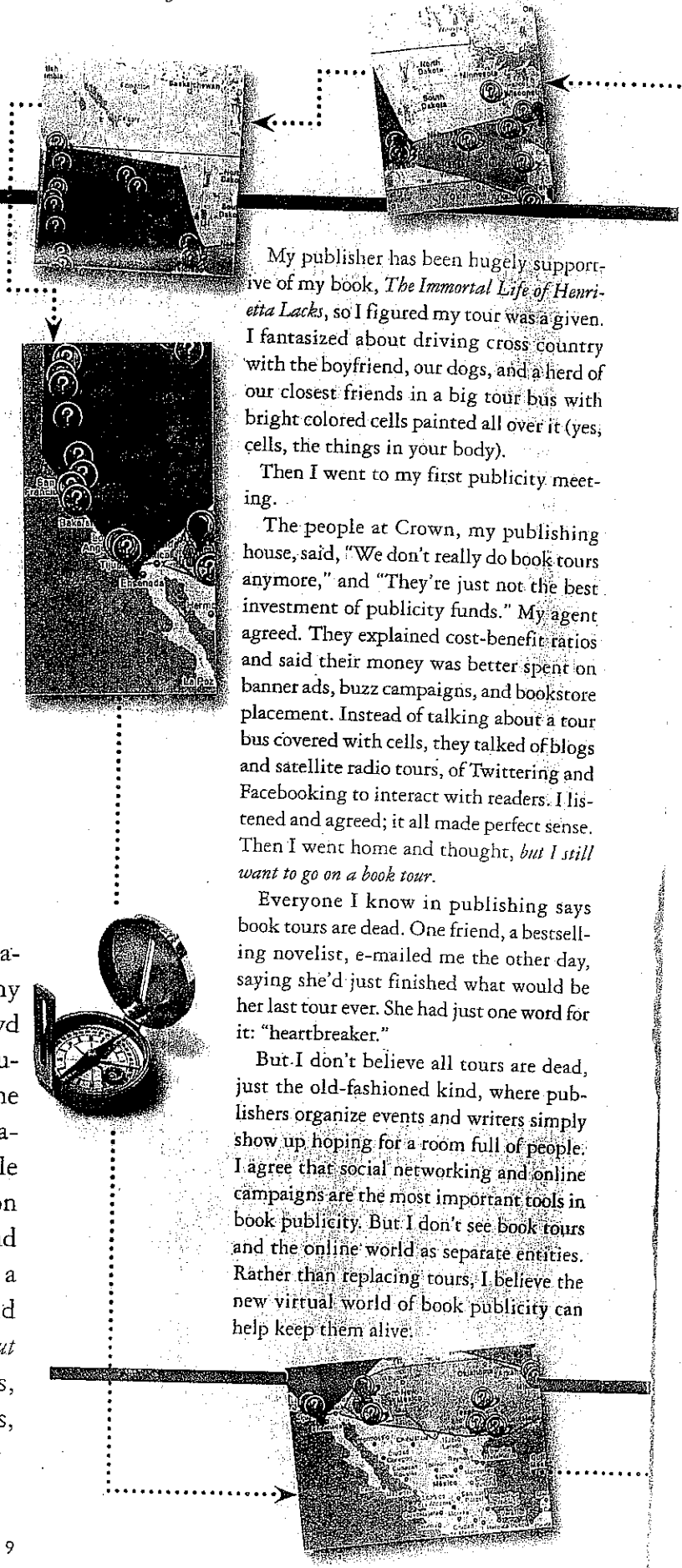
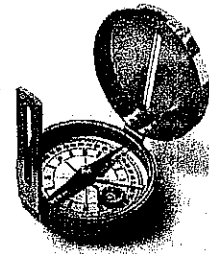


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The Immortal Book Tour

BY REBECCA SKLOOT

A month ago, I'd have thought the idea of organizing my own book tour with the help of my brain-damaged father was nuts. My father, Floyd Skloot, has written several books about the neurologic damage he suffered from a virus in the '80s—it affected his memory, his abstract reasoning, and his ability to think about multiple things at once. Exactly the abilities a person needs to envision and organize a book tour. And I'm no better. Somewhere between writing a book, taking a teaching job, freelancing, and becoming my own publicist, things got a bit *out of control*. My office floor is piled with papers, my inbox has thousands of unanswered e-mails, and I scramble to keep up.



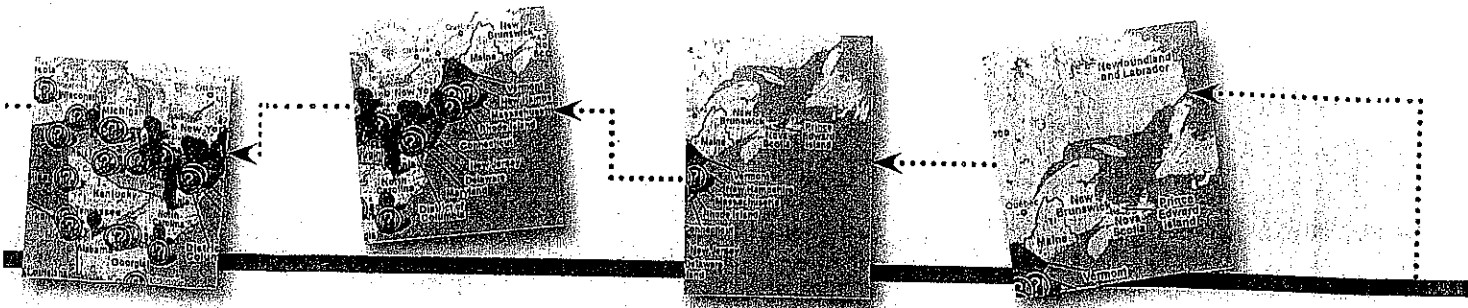
My publisher has been hugely supportive of my book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, so I figured my tour was a given. I fantasized about driving cross country with the boyfriend, our dogs, and a herd of our closest friends in a big tour bus with bright colored cells painted all over it (yes, cells, the things in your body).

Then I went to my first publicity meeting.

The people at Crown, my publishing house, said, "We don't really do book tours anymore," and "They're just not the best investment of publicity funds." My agent agreed. They explained cost-benefit ratios and said their money was better spent on banner ads, buzz campaigns, and bookstore placement. Instead of talking about a tour bus covered with cells, they talked of blogs and satellite radio tours, of Twittering and Facebooking to interact with readers. I listened and agreed; it all made perfect sense. Then I went home and thought, *but I still want to go on a book tour.*

Everyone I know in publishing says book tours are dead. One friend, a bestselling novelist, e-mailed me the other day, saying she'd just finished what would be her last tour ever. She had just one word for it: "heartbreaker."

But I don't believe all tours are dead, just the old-fashioned kind, where publishers organize events and writers simply show up hoping for a room full of people. I agree that social networking and online campaigns are the most important tools in book publicity. But I don't see book tours and the online world as separate entities. Rather than replacing tours, I believe the new virtual world of book publicity can help keep them alive.



When I found out my publishing house wasn't sending me on tour, I thought about hiring a freelance publicist to organize one for me. Then I heard estimates in the \$20,000 range, and I did something many authors probably wouldn't do: I freaked out and called my dad.

I knew I could get speaking invitations with help from my many Facebook and Twitter friends, and I was pretty sure I could get my expenses covered by speaking at universities. But who has the time to set all that up while working and publishing a book?

"No problem," my dad said. "I'll be your publicist."

"I can see the headlines now," I told him. "Brain-Damaged Man Organizes Daughter's Book Tour—Daughter Ends Up in Two Places at Once."

"I'm serious," he said. "If any book in our family deserves a tour, it's yours." (Some relevant background: my father has published 15 books, but never gone on tour—his publishers, all independent and university presses, couldn't help with publicity.)

"We can do this," my father said.

So I set up an online Immortal Book Tour calendar and interactive Google Map, with little people and question mark icons on any city where we knew someone who might help. I called my father, who required nearly a decade of persuasion before he tried e-mail for the first time, and taught him to use the map. Our first session went like this:

Me: "Okay, click the map and drag it to your left to find New York."

Dad: "Uh oh. I just clicked something and a light flashed in

my room, now I'm in Japan."

Me: "Click the 'back' button to get back to the U.S."

Dad: "Are there supposed to be a lot of little green people everywhere?"

Me: "Yes, those are our friends."

Soon, we did a test run with our friend Dinty W. Moore at Ohio University. I sent him a link to the map and a note explaining what we were doing. He e-mailed professors in the medical school, pointing them to my Web site and asking if they'd like to cohost an event. A few days later, I had an expense-paid trip with four events at the school and a plan to organize a local bookstore reading. My dad handled the calendar and map, calculating the perfect date for the visit based on where I had to be before and after—a job he's uniquely qualified for, since the damaged part of his brain has nothing on the protective-father part that knows I'll schedule myself to death. It worked perfectly. So the next day, we went public: I posted a link to the map on Twitter and Facebook, and we started e-mailing people we knew, asking for help.

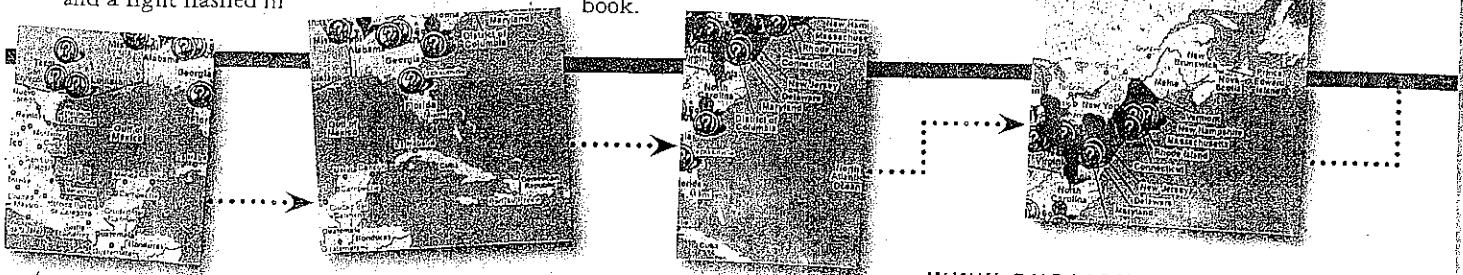
Now, I'm not suggesting that posting a request for help on Facebook will miraculously result in a successful book tour. Far from it. A plan like this requires an established social network, something writers should start developing years before publishing a book. It also helps to have a book that fits well with the general public and academia, which mine does: there's science, ethics, race, history. But more than anything, it requires an active network, online and off, and a willingness to do anything necessary to promote your book.

Few people go into writing thinking they'll have to become publicists. My students often imagine their future as something akin to the famous picture of E.B. White working in his Maine cottage: a pristine room, a lovely view, art flowing forth into the world where the masses read and love it, while the author creates more art. The reality is, in today's market, writers have no choice but to embrace their inner PR person.

When I posted our crazy interactive Immortal Book Tour Map with a note saying, "Help bring *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* to your town," the response was astonishing. Within minutes I had invitations to give expense-paid talks at two different universities, one in a medical school and another in an African-American studies program.

I got more than a hundred responses that first day, and they weren't all invitations. Many writers sent warnings about how terrible book tours can be: endless nights in bad hotels, readings where only two people show up. But I'm a science person, and that's all anecdotal evidence. I want a cost-benefit study, hard data showing the book tour's demise. But how do you calculate investment return on a bookseller who hears your reading, falls in love with your book, then recommends it to customers for years? Or the lone professor in the audience who starts assigning your book to hundreds of students? Or the blogger who goes home and posts about it?

Readers and writers crave personal connections with each other. The online world



To read an excerpt from *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, go to www.publishersweekly.com/skloot.

Pushing Process over Product

So how do you establish a strong social network? A writer friend recently told me she wanted to use Facebook and Twitter to promote her new book: "The way you post about every step of your process is a good idea," she said. "It makes people feel like they're involved in the whole process and builds anticipation." The thing is, I'm not making my Facebook and Twitter friends feel like they're involved. They are involved. They helped me decide on my book's subtitle and pick my author photo; they've suggested ideas for publicity and offered support when things were hard.

This is where a lot of writers go wrong on Facebook and Twitter: they view them as places to issue press releases, and they keep their real personalities out of it. But that's not how it works. I post about the process of publishing my book, but I also post about my dogs, news I think is interesting or funny—but not the weather or what I'm eating. The person I am on Facebook and Twitter isn't an author/publicist persona, it's me.

allows that in wonderful ways, but it doesn't replace face time. Perhaps this is especially true for writers like me. Many readers are convinced that all science writing is boring. When they hear about my book, their eyes glaze (*great, a book about cells*). But when I start telling the story of those cells—one of the most important tools in medicine, taken from a poor black woman without her knowledge, bought and sold by the millions while her family struggled to afford health insurance—that gets their attention. And their attention means more than book sales: I spent a decade digging this story out from dusty

basements, archives, and memories, because I believe it's an important one that needs to get out to the world.

In the days after launching the Immortal Book Tour map, I got e-mails from friends virtual and otherwise, from Indiana, Connecticut, Texas, California, Pennsylvania, Alaska, Switzerland, Canada, Germany, and many places between. They

volunteered to organize and publicize bookstore events; they invited me to speak at high schools, scientific research organizations, and book groups. One of Henrietta Lacks's relatives read about the tour on my blog and sent me an e-mail saying, "My goal is to see that it is widely purchased as a way to honor my cousin Henrietta... and her family." She also wanted

to organize book-related events to encourage science education in low-income schools across the country. With each request, my father planned my route, figured out dates, and added them to the map; for \$1 per event, booktour.com added each one to my book tour page there, which helps spread the word and generate more events.

As of this writing, we have events booked in 14 cities and 18 other possible events in the works. The tour starts February 2, 2010, the book's publication date. And the map is still accepting invitations.

The Editor Speaks: "Just Read It"

By Rachel Klayman

These days editors are often required to sum up each of their books in one or two tidy sentences. No pressure: just capture the Platonic essence of the book in a way that triggers exhilaration and confidence in your marketing and publicity team and the desire to order stackable quantities in booksellers. I chafe, sometimes I cringe—yet I usually manage to write the sentence.

But then I took on Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Here was a book that refused to be contained in a sentence. The multiple story lines resonated like a musical chord. There were haunting synchronicities, detours, dissonances. Science and superstition butted up against each other; issues of poverty and racial injustice crept in. The author was a presence in the narrative; her interaction with the descendants of Henrietta Lacks became the emotional core of the book.

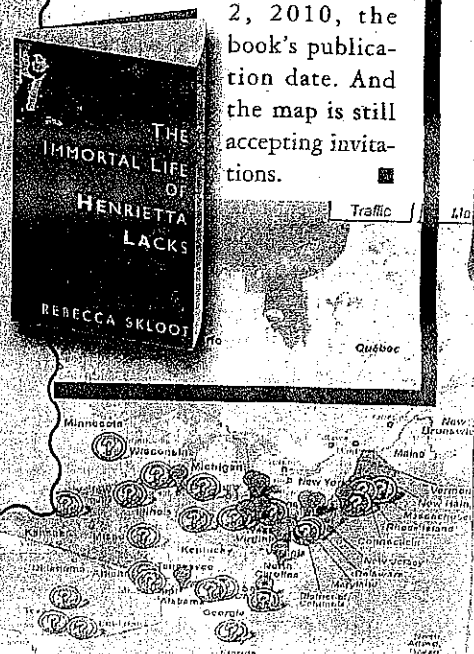
Even after 10 years working on the book, Rebecca couldn't write the sentence either. It stumped everyone.

Before there was even a manuscript, a major Hollywood producer stalking the book imagined it as "*Erin Brockovich* meets *Jurassic Park*." One blurber called it "*The Wire* meets *Liver of a Cell*."

When it came time to choose a subtitle, the struggle continued. Everything Rebecca and I tried was ungainly, inadequate. One evening, we were on the phone brainstorming and joked that we ought to make the subtitle read like the voiceover in a movie trailer. I imagined an ominous baritone: "No one knew her name... Doctors took her cells without asking... Those cells never died..." It was melodramatic, but the idea of layering on sentences took hold. And in the end, we decided to embrace the complexity and go with several sentences—an actual block of text. Amazingly, the sales force liked it.

Secretly, I was pleased by my failure. It was proof that the book is distinctive, irreducible. It has many strands, but they're as tightly interwoven as the DNA inside Henrietta's cells—the cells at the heart of this story. I can't wait to be able to hand people the book and when they ask, "What's it about?" just say, "Read it."

Klayman is an executive editor at Crown Publishing.



Reprinted from Ingram's Ashanti Advance magazine

AN IMMORTAL LEGACY

and the Family that Didn't Know for 25 Years

by Lauren Lexa



Photo credit: Majica Townsend

In the early 1950s, Henrietta Lacks, a poor, uneducated African-American woman, began undergoing treatment for cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins, during which doctors took a tissue sample. Although Lacks died a few months later, hers became the first human cells to live—and reproduce—in cultures.

These workhorses have been used to confirm the effectiveness of the polio vaccine and have led to advances in gene mapping, cloning, in vitro fertilization, and stem cell research. Despite the glory of the HeLa cells, for 25 years after her death her husband and children had no idea that a part

of her father's experience as a research subject.

I do think I would have become obsessed with Henrietta's cells regardless of my father's illness: I was a science nerd, and HeLa blew my mind—cells outliving the woman they came from, growing like the Blob until there were so many of them they'd weigh more than 20 million metric tons if you could put them on a scale. In the end, it was the combination of amazing science plus the important human story behind it that really grabbed me.

Henrietta's daughter Deborah would have answered this question differently. She always said that her mother's story became my passion because Henrietta wanted it to be. Deborah believed her mother chose me at a young age to tell her story, and guided my life so I'd study science and then writing, so I could put the two together and write this book. After all I've been through with this story and the Lacks family, I can't say there isn't a part of me that wonders if she's right.

of Henrietta lived on in labs all over the world. Author Rebecca Skloot brings to light this untold story in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

Ashanti Advance recently caught up with Skloot for the following Q&A:

You first heard of HeLa cells and the woman behind them in 1988 when you were 16—37 years after her death—and by the time you were in grad school studying writing, you had become fixated on the idea of telling Henrietta Lacks's story. Can you share with us why that became your passion?

I was primed to notice the story of Henrietta Lacks in part because of what was going on in my personal life: I was 16 and my father had just gotten sick with a mysterious illness no one was able to diagnose. He went from being the dad I'd always known—a marathon runner and full-time worker—to being a man who had problems thinking and spent his time lying in our living room because he couldn't climb stairs. It turned out he'd sustained severe brain damage from a viral infection, and eventually he enrolled in an experimental drug study. Since he couldn't operate a car, I drove him to and from the hospital several times a week, and sat with him and other research subjects while they got treatments. In the end, there were ethical questions about how the study was handled—all the subjects were promised they'd receive the drug for free, but that never happened. Through that study I learned a lot about the promise and hope of science, as well as the complicated and sometimes painful ways it can affect people's lives. That same year, when I heard my biology teacher mention that Henrietta's cells had been growing in laboratories for decades after her death, one of my first thoughts was, *I wonder if she had any kids and how they feel about her cells being used in research?* I imagine I asked that question in part because I was grappling with the emotions associated with watching my

The challenges of doing the research for this book and obtaining interviews with her family and those involved were quite daunting. What kept you going for the 10 years you worked on this book?

Daunting is exactly the right word to describe it. My boyfriend once counted the number of times in one week that I used the word "overwhelmed" to describe how I felt about the book. I often joked that after spending a third of my life being the person who was writing the book, I was very ready to be the person who had written it. And I won't lie, some days it felt like I was destined to spend the rest of my life trying.

Many things kept me going, including my family, and my relationship with Deborah Lacks (though sometimes that was also one of the obstacles). But one thing that helped tremendously was talking about the book with total strangers. Many writers don't talk about their work-in-progress because they believe telling the story aloud will make their writing stale. I was exactly the opposite with this book; I talked about it to anyone one I could. People have very powerful and often emotional reactions to hearing Henrietta's story for the first time, and they're usually filled with questions: Wasn't it illegal for doctors to take her cells without asking? (No.) Did the family get any of the profits made from selling her cells? (No.) Everyone who heard about the book got excited and told me to get back to work because they couldn't wait to read it; their reactions were jolts of energy that kept me going. They reminded me that this is an incredibly important story that people need and want to know.

What did you do to keep the story fresh in your mind?

Telling it over and over helped keep the narrative alive and fresh.

Deborah would often ask me to tell her stories about her mother, and each time I'd focus on something slightly different. A friend of mine who'd heard me tell the story many times once said that she never got bored with it, because each telling was like peeling back another deeper layer. The other thing that helped was listening to elder Lackses tell their stories again and again. Their renditions were filled with vivid detail, and each retelling helped keep the story alive.

What was your biggest surprise in this project?

The biggest surprise for me was probably the role that religion ended up playing in the story. I came to this book as a science person who'd never practiced any religion, and was so uncomfortable with it that I'd leave the room any time it came up. But there was no avoiding faith with the Lackses. Some members of Henrietta's family believe she was chosen as an angel, that HeLa cells are a vessel for her spirit, kept alive in laboratories around the world so she could help save lives through medical advances. (Some Lackses worry about whether it hurts Henrietta when researchers inject the cells with toxins, or destroy them with radiation, or send them to the moon.) While researching this book, I read the Bible for the first time, found myself in many churches, and watched a preacher lay hands on Deborah to help lift the emotional burden of her mother's cells. I don't find myself converted (though not for lack of anyone trying), but I did come away with a new understanding of and appreciation for faith, and the role faith plays in people's lives.

What is your theory about why the HeLa cells have lived so long—spreading through the air in research labs, overpowering every cell culture?

Even to scientists, it's a bit of a mystery. Henrietta's cervical cancer was caused by HPV, the sexually transmitted virus, and something about the way that virus interacted with her cells made that cancer more powerful than any her doctor had seen.

This is also the story of attitudes towards race and class, specifically the medical community's use of African-American patients as research subjects—usually without their knowledge or full understanding. How did doctors and researchers justify their work and experiments on African Americans morally and ethically?

There is a long and dark history of scientists using African Americans in research without their knowledge or consent. In most cases, they justified that research in the same way that slavery was justified: by telling themselves that African Americans didn't feel pain as white people did, that they were somehow less human.

In Henrietta's case, the researchers never justified their actions because no one questioned them. And in fact what they did was not illegal. It was legal for a doctor to take a person's cells without asking (it still is in most cases), and often people think of "legal" and "ethical" as being the same thing. Class was definitely also a factor. Henrietta was not only black but poor, and she received free treatment at Hopkins for that reason; at that time, the prevailing attitude at Hopkins was that doctors were entitled to use charity cases in research.

What do you hope readers take away from this story?

I hope the book illustrates for scientists that there are people behind every biological sample they work with in their labs, and that those people often have their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to those tissues. A researcher once said to me, "When I take samples from patients, our lives cross for only a few moments, if that. Honestly, I don't think about the impact that moment could have on them after I leave the room." Many scientists have told me that they never thought about where HeLa cells came from. When they learn Henrietta's story, they often feel indebted to her, particularly those who built their careers using her cells. They often say that after learning Henrietta's story, their labs feel haunted by her, as if her story and ghost now live in their labs

along with her cells. This is a good thing, they say. I recently got an email from a researcher who's spent decades growing HeLa cells by the billions in his lab, and what he said was one of the greatest compliments I've ever gotten: "While reading, I took a break at one point and had a look at my HeLa cells under the microscope," he said. "Your book has forever changed the way I'll view them." That was definitely one of my goals.

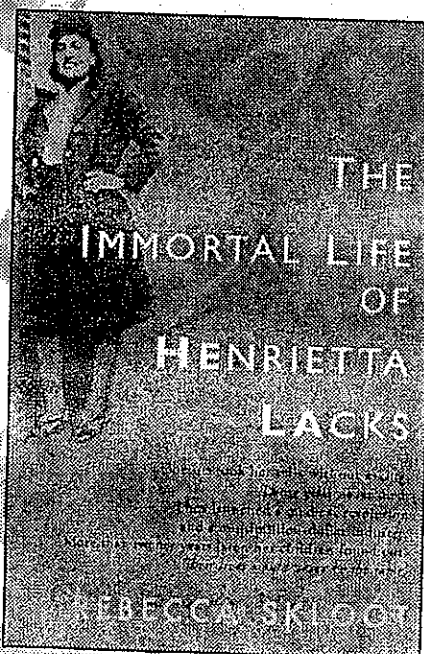
One thing I hope the general public takes away from the story is that there are also people behind the scientists in this story. Science is wondrous and important, and human, which means that sometimes things go wrong regardless of intentions. George Gey, the researcher who first grew the HeLa cells, has been held up for decades as a racist scientist who stole cells from Henrietta Lacks and kept them secret from her family because he knew they were valuable. But in fact, the real story is quite different.

PW's starred review says that, "Letting people and events speak for themselves, Skloot tells a rich, resonant tale of modern science, the wonders it can perform, and how easily it can exploit society's most vulnerable people." How has coming to know Henrietta and her family, and the scientists using HeLa cells impacted your personal opinions on cell and tissue ownership and use?

The story of the Lacks family shows why it's important to improve on our current policies so we're able to protect the desires and rights of the people whose cells are used in research. But the last thing I want readers to take away from this story is the idea that all research on cells and tissues is dangerous or bad. Cell culture is used to develop everything from flu vaccines to chemotherapy drugs. Scientists expose cells to radiation, cosmetics, viruses, household chemicals, and biological weapons and study their responses—they can't do that research on living humans. Without research on cells, we would have no tests for diseases like hepatitis and HIV, no vaccines for rabies, smallpox, measles; none of the promising new drugs for leukemia, breast cancer, colon cancer. We need that research, which means scientists need access to tissue samples. We just need to make sure that access doesn't come at the expense of the "donors" of those tissues.

Now that *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is completed, what is your next project?

For now, my next project is to keep talking about *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as much as I can. I'm in the midst of planning a three-month book tour in which I will travel to bookstores, schools, and book groups around the country telling the story of Henrietta and her cells, and answering questions. Those interested in having me stop in their towns can visit RebeccaSkloot.com and click on "book tour" for details.



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