

Cover Story



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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.



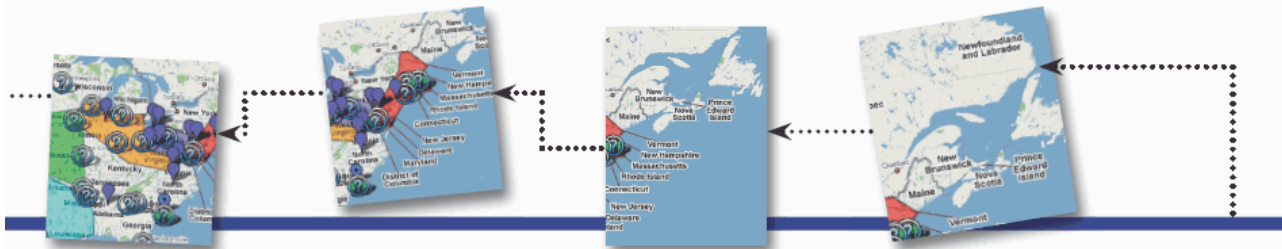
My publisher has been hugely supportive of my book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, so I figured my tour was a given. I fantasized about driving cross country with the boyfriend, our dogs, and a herd of our closest friends in a big tour bus with bright colored cells painted all over it (yes,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



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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 *Lives 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.

