I first learned about HeLa cells, and the woman behind them, as a teenager sitting in a freshman biology class. I knew only fragments of Henrietta’s story, but those fragments inspired me to start asking questions—about science and mortality, bioethics, and how I’d feel if my own cells were used in research. I didn’t yet know that her cells had launched a multibillion dollar industry while her children lived in poverty, or that the cells had devastating consequences for the family.

Henrietta’s story captures the imagination of students in any number of disciplines, including the sciences, medicine, African American studies, sociology, philosophy, law, bioethics, journalism, and creative writing. I’ve spoken about HeLa at schools around the country, where students are transfixed by the story. I tell them that if you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown on a scale they would weigh more than one hundred Empire State Buildings, and that HeLa has been fused with mouse cells to create Henrietta-mouse hybrid cells. It’s the stuff of science fiction, but it’s true, and students love it. Combine that with the story of Henrietta’s family—a tale about science, religion, race, and class—and students’ reactions are powerful.

During Q&As, the first question is usually: “Wasn’t it illegal to take her cells and use them in research without asking?” The answer is no—not in 1951, and not in 2011. Today, most Americans have their tissue on file somewhere through routine blood tests or biopsies. And since the late sixties, when testing newborns for genetic diseases became required by law, each baby born in the United States has had blood taken, and those samples are often stored and used by scientists. This means that the majority of college students in this country have tissues of their own being used in research, and neither they nor their parents likely realize it.

As a college professor, I always look for books that bring together the many disparate fields that students will study throughout their careers and that allow them to explore the real-world consequences of intellectual discoveries. Other professors tell me The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks does just that, bringing together health, community, family, ethics, religion, science, storytelling, history, business, law, and humanity.

Since spring 2010, I have talked about my book at more than one hundred schools nationwide. As a regular guest lecturer who also works as a correspondent for radio and television, I understand the importance of being an engaging speaker, and my talks have been called “moving and engaging of both the heart and mind.” You can visit the events page of my website at RebeccaSkloot.com to see if I’ll be speaking at your school, and you can contact me through the site. I look forward to visiting even more schools as part of their Freshman Experience Programs.

As a college biology major, I couldn’t have imagined that Henrietta’s story would lead me to become a writer, or that writing this book would be a ten-year journey. There’s no telling what effect this story could have on students. I can’t wait to find out.