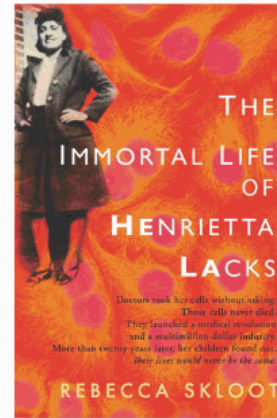


Author Profile

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."

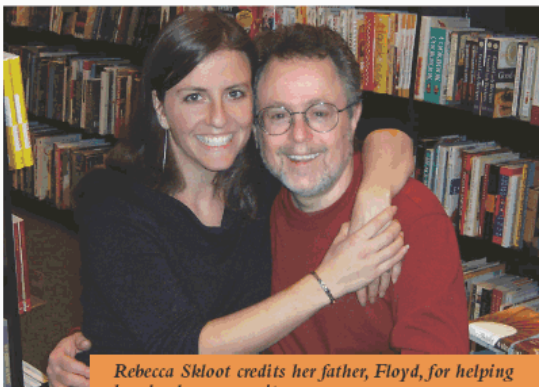
Skloot devoted 10 years to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and its road to publication was a tortuous one that exemplifies both the worst and the best an author can experience. "I'm on my third publishing house and my fourth editor," Skloot says. Her first publisher, W.H. Freeman, folded, and 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 as a writer.