



How Rebecca Skloot Wrote the Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

by David Dobbs, posted November 22, 2011

Rebecca Skloot

[Rebecca Skloot](#) needs little introduction to most readers of *The Open Notebook*: Her book [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) has been a bestseller since its publication in February 2010, and she has toured the U.S. and Europe almost constantly since then talking about the book and the many issues of race, science, and privacy it raises. She's also been interviewed [many times](#) as well. Here she talks with *TON* guest contributor [David Dobbs](#) about two particularly writerly issues the book raises: structure, and the use of the writer as character:

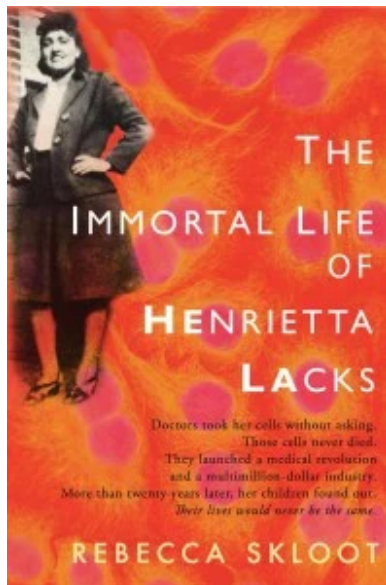
You've been interviewed to death about this book, so I'll limit this to two areas readers of *The Open Notebook* might be interested in: one is structure and the other is your decision to put yourself in the book and how you handled that.

That's good. I honestly think that structure is one of the most important tools in writing, yet it's not something that people often pick apart and really get obsessed with.

Did you carry your concern about structure into this project, or was it something you developed as you wrestled with it?

No, I came to the book already fixated on structure. I did my MFA in nonfiction at the University of Pittsburgh, and Lee Gutkind, who was one of my professors there, taught a readings class where he constantly harped on structure. Every class, the first exercise we had to do with every piece we read was map out the structure. The first day of class we read an essay in class and his first question when we were done was, "What's the structure of this piece?" We had no idea what he meant. And he wouldn't tell us. He would just push us and push us, and people would randomly guess things ... They'd say, "It's a profile." He'd say, "No, that's not a structure."

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Eventually it clicked for me when he walked me line-by-line through a piece he'd written and said, *See how the piece starts here, then goes back in time here, then forward in time here, but always comes back to that same story I started with, which is actually in chronological order?* The story was about a veterinarian facing tough decisions about whether to euthanize various animals; it did jump around in time a lot, and included sections of exposition, or facts—like the history of the field, or whatever—that weren't part of the narrative, but when you pulled the essay apart it became clear that the structure was just a day in the life of this vet going from one patient to the next. From that point on, I started obsessively mapping out the structures of everything I read. When I started teaching I made my students do the same thing.

Any student who has ever studied with me would think, “Ugh. Structure, structure, structure; that’s all she talked about.” My philosophy is, once you understand what structure is, then you can talk about characters and narrative arcs and how to fill in the story. But for me, structure can just completely make or break something.

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What are some key teaching pieces you used?

I always use John McPhee’s “Travels in Georgia” because it’s such a brilliant structure. Once you figure it out, it’s so basic. But it’s really hard to see it at first. When you say to people, “Read this thing and tell me how it’s structured,” they just can’t. But once you really pick it apart you see he starts in the middle of the story, then he goes forward for a while, then loops back around so by the middle of the piece you’re back at the point where you started, then you continue forward. He’s so subtle and graceful with the structure that few readers even realize they’ve looped back around to the point where the story started because he doesn’t hit you over the head with it. He calls it the lowercase e structure, and once you learn to recognize it you see it everywhere—in so many great stories, books, movies.

Are there other writers or books who have been particular models for you, structure-wise?

When I was working on my book, I knew very early on that I wanted it to be a disjointed structure that told multiple stories at once and jumped around in time between different characters. If you learn the story of the HeLa cells by itself, it’s a very different story than if you learn it alongside the story of what happened to Henrietta and her family as a result of those cells. Each story takes on a different weight when you learn them at the same time.

Plus, if I had just told the story from the beginning—“Henrietta Lacks was born ... blah, blah, blah”—nobody would have known why they should care who Henrietta was. Then Deborah, Henrietta’s daughter, would have appeared about halfway through the book and the focus of the story would have suddenly shifted completely to her, since she’s really the main character of the book in many ways. Then a few hundred pages later I would have appeared as a character out of nowhere. It would have all been very disjointed and disorienting and wouldn’t have worked.

The other thing I knew was that I wanted my book to read like a novel but be entirely true. That to me is the definition of Creative Nonfiction. So instead of reading nonfiction books as models, I turned to fiction. As soon as I realized I had to structure the book in a disjointed way, I went to a local bookseller, explained the story to her and said, *Find me any novel you can find that takes place in multiple time periods, with multiple characters and voices, and jumps around a lot.* So she did. Some of the most helpful books early on for me were *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, by Fannie Flagg; *Love Medicine*, by Louise Erdrich; *As I Lay Dying*, by William Faulkner; *Home at the End of the World* and *The Hours*, by Michael Cunningham. I read a long list of similarly structured novels that all proved helpful in some way or another: *The Grass Dancer*, by Susan Power; *How to Make an American Quilt*, by Whitney Otto; *Oral History*, by Lee Smith. I also read a lot of important African American authors to immerse myself in their voices, cultures, history: Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Alex Haley, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison, Edward P. Jones, Albert French ... it's a long list.

In a way you have to claim the right to do certain things fairly early in a book, or you can't do it. In this case you had to claim the right to go backward and forward in time. You wait a while to get you in there—you don't appear until page 67. But that's early enough.

Right. This relates to the famous line from Chekov: "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act." You need to set the reader up early for the story that follows while not introducing extraneous stuff that isn't related to the plot.

In this case, since I knew the book was going to be a braid of three narratives (the story of me and Deborah; the story of Henrietta and the cells; and the story of Henrietta's family), I needed to introduce all three strands of the braid up front, so I wouldn't lose readers later. Doing that lets readers know what to expect and gives you license to play with the structure and timeline because you've prepared them for it. I spent a lot of time working and re-working how I'd handle introducing all three stories up front since there were so many things to squeeze in.

How do you get all those into the beginning of the book?

In a way there are three beginnings to this book because there are three different narratives. The prologue introduces the "me" side of the narrative where I write in first person. Then right after that I have that one little page in Deborah's voice, to get her firmly in there. I struggled with that. I knew she had to be in the beginning of the book so you'd know she was going to be a main, strong character. I made countless attempts at that using different scenes from late in the story (for a while the book started with the scene of her seeing her mother's cells for the first time, which is now part of the climax of the book in the third section). But none of that worked because it detracted too much from the real beginning: the moment Henrietta walks into the hospital for the first time in 1951. Eventually I realized readers just need to hear Deborah's voice enough at the start to know there's something big coming from this person later on that we'll come back to.

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Back to the larger structure. You start at 1950, and you pop back to 1920, and then essentially you come back to mid-century, end of century, mid-century, end of century, mid-century, end of century. And you progressively spend more time around 2000, and at a certain point it becomes more the story of you and Deborah, once you have the backstory established. How did you plot these time shifts?

I actually mapped it all out with index cards. The one chronological story that goes throughout the book is the story of me and Deborah. That's totally chronological, never jumps around in time. Having one chronological story helped anchor the structure so I could jump around with the other stories more, because you always came back to that one straightforward narrative.

As I said earlier, I saw the structure of the book as a braid, with three stories that wove and wove and wove. But at a certain point the three strands of the braid became one and the narrative was just a straightforward chronological story from that point. That happens on page 231 with the sentence, "That reporter was me." That's the moment that all three of the narratives come together, and then it becomes just one. There's no jumping back in time after that.

The story of you and Deborah is the one with the most classic narrative tension—there's a suspense about what will happen.

It's a road-trip—a journey where everybody gets transformed. I thought a lot about that element of narrative tension and how structure can help build the suspense. I learned quite a bit about that from novels, but even more so from movies. My boyfriend is an actor, writer, and director, and he started saying, "You should be watching movies because this jumping-around structure is one of the most



Skloot's color-coded index cards. Photo courtesy of Rebecca Skloot.

So I started watching a lot of movies structured like that and eventually found my way to "Hurricane," about Hurricane Carter, the boxer. As I was watching it, I just freaked out because after the first few scenes I realized, *Oh my God, this is the structure of my book*. Three narratives braided together, a journey, etc. So I storyboarded that whole movie frame-by-frame on color-coded index cards (one color per narrative thread). I'd already mapped my own book out using the same three-colored index card scheme, and I'd mapped out a structure, but it wasn't working. After I mapped out "Hurricane" I spread the cards out on a bed and put my book's index cards on top of them, lining up the colors, to see how the film was braiding differently than I was. I immediately realized the problem with my structure was that it didn't move around in time fast enough. That was the big lesson I learned from movies: that to make this kind of structure work, it has to move quickly. You can't linger too long in any one time period or you lose the momentum of the other two.

How many designs did you try but throw out?

Oh man ... From the very first version I wrote to the first version I considered a first draft, I probably

went through easily 15 different structures. And that doesn't count the many times I revised it after that: I'm a heavy re-writer. Once I had a first draft done, I rewrote it completely at least six times before my editor had to pry it out of my hands. I could have kept rewriting it forever. There isn't a single paragraph from the first draft that made it into the final book without being rewritten. I'd bet money that there isn't a single sentence from the first draft in the finished book.

This will give comfort to others who are struggling.

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