Once upon a time, April 2000 to be exact, this contributor note appeared in our pages:

Rebecca Skloot was the assistant editor of Pitt Med until this spring, when the call of her book in progress became too loud to ignore. . . . She will continue to contribute to Pitt Med as our favorite freelancer until Oprah steals her away.

That book in progress was The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, which has spent more than six years on the New York Times bestseller list since it was published in 2010. (The manuscript was also Skloot’s thesis for her MFA from Pitt.) The book title refers to HeLa cells, named for their progenitor, Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman who lived outside of Baltimore and died at age 31 of cervical cancer. Her extraordinarily durable cancer cells have been omnipresent in labs for decades, because Pitt grad George Gey (A&S 1921) figured out how to keep them alive while he was on the faculty at Johns Hopkins. HeLa cells made hundreds of medical breakthroughs possible, including the polio vaccine. Yet for decades, Henrietta Lacks’s family didn’t know they lived on after their mother’s death, nor that they were being used for medical research. Skloot’s book weaves the family story with larger issues of genetic ownership.

Winfrey not only endorsed the book but took it on as a movie project. The HBO production, which Winfrey executive-produced and starred in, aired this spring. During a publicity tour in Manhattan in April, Skloot and members of the Lacks family were wowed by ads promoting the movie’s release seemingly around every corner. Skloot posted on Instagram: #HeLaFilm posters filling the city. They are everywhere, just like #HeLa. This is too much joy to not share. —Erica Lloyd