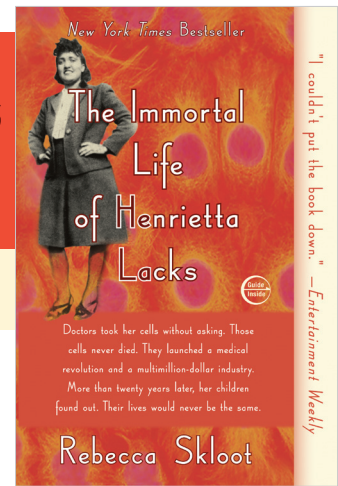


The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Rebecca Skloot

A Reader's Guide

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1950, Henrietta Lacks, a young mother of five children, entered the colored ward of The Johns Hopkins Hospital to begin treatment for an extremely aggressive strain of cervical cancer. As she lay on the operating table, a sample of her cancerous cervical tissue was taken without her knowledge or consent and given to Dr. George Gey, the head of tissue research. Gey was conducting experiments in an attempt to create an immortal line of human cells that could be used in medical research. Those cells, he hoped, would allow scientists to unlock the mysteries of cancer, and eventually lead to a cure for the disease. Until this point, all of Gey's attempts to grow a human cell line had ended in failure, but Henrietta's cells were different: they never died.

Less than a year after her initial diagnosis, Henrietta succumbed to the ravages of cancer and was buried in an unmarked grave on her family's land. She was just thirty-one years old. Her family had no idea that part of her was still alive, growing vigorously in laboratories—first at Johns Hopkins, and eventually all over the world.

Thirty-seven years after Henrietta's death, sixteen-year-old Rebecca Skloot was a high school student sitting in a biology class when her instructor mentioned that HeLa, the first immortal human cell line ever grown in culture, had been taken from an African American woman named Henrietta Lacks. His casual remark sparked Skloot's interest, and led to a research project that would take over a decade to complete. Her investigation of the true story behind HeLa eventually led her to form significant—and in some cases, life changing—relationships with the surviving members of the Lacks family, especially Henrietta's daughter, Deborah.

In telling Henrietta's story, Skloot draws from primary sources and personal interviews to provide insightful narrative accounts of Henrietta's childhood, young adulthood, diagnosis, illness, and tragic death. She also explores the birth and life of the immortal cell line HeLa, and shows how research involving HeLa has changed the landscape of medical research, leading to not only scientific and medical breakthroughs, but also new and evolving policies concerning the rights of patients and research subjects.

As the story of HeLa unfolds, so does the story of Henrietta's surviving children, who for two decades were unaware of the existence of their mother's cells—and the multimillion-dollar industry that developed around the production and use of HeLa. Central to this narrative is the relationship between Skloot and Deborah. As Skloot tenaciously worked to gain Deborah's trust, Deborah struggled to understand what had happened to her mother and her mother's cells. The result of their relationship is an illuminating portrait of the enduring legacy of Henrietta's life, death, and immortality.