



Title: The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Author: Rebecca Skloot

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BOOK RESUME: THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS

BOOK SYNOPSIS

Her name was Henrietta Lacks, but scientists know her as HeLa. She was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine: The first “immortal” human cells grown in culture, which are still alive today, though she has been dead for more than sixty years. HeLa cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the atom bomb’s effects; helped lead to important advances like in vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene mapping; and have been bought and sold by the billions.

Yet Henrietta Lacks remains virtually unknown, buried in an unmarked grave.

Henrietta’s family did not learn of her “immortality” until more than twenty years after her death, when scientists investigating HeLa began using her husband and children in research without informed consent. And though the cells had launched a multimillion-dollar industry that sells human biological materials, her family never saw any of the profits. As Rebecca Skloot so brilliantly shows, the story of the Lacks family—past and present—is inextricably connected to the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, the birth of bioethics, and the legal battles over whether we control the stuff we are made of.

Intimate in feeling, astonishing in scope, and impossible to put down, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* captures the beauty and drama of scientific discovery, as well as its human consequences.

REVIEWS AND PRAISE

“*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a fascinating read and a ringing success. It is a well-written, carefully-researched, complex saga of medical research, bioethics, and race in America. Above all it is a human story of redemption for a family, torn by loss, and for a writer with a vision that would not let go.”

—Douglas Whyntott, *The Boston Globe*

“One of the most graceful and moving nonfiction books I’ve read in a very long time . . . *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* . . . floods over you like a narrative dam break, as if someone had managed to distill and purify the more addictive qualities of *Erin Brockovich*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and *The Andromeda Strain*.” —Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

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*Publisher suggested age range covers the wide range of readers publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate range for their diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book’s intended use.

“A stunning illustration of how race, gender and disease intersect to produce a unique form of social vulnerability, this is a poignant, necessary and brilliant book.” —Alondra Nelson, Columbia University; editor of *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*

“Writing with a novelist’s artistry, a biologist’s expertise, and the zeal of an investigative reporter, Skloot tells a truly astonishing story of racism and poverty, science and conscience, spirituality and family driven by a galvanizing inquiry into the sanctity of the body and the very nature of the life force.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“Science journalist Skloot makes a remarkable debut with this multilayered story about ‘faith, science, journalism, and grace.’ . . . A rich, resonant tale of modern science, the wonders it can perform and how easily it can exploit society’s most vulnerable people.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

- Winner of the 2010 American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Young Adult Science Book Award
- Winner of the 2010 *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize
- Winner of the 2010 Medical Journalists’ Association Open Book Award, General Readership, Non-Fiction
- Winner of the 2011 Chicago Public Library and the Chicago Public Library Foundation 21st Century Award
- Winner of the 2011 Library of Virginia Literary Award for Nonfiction
- Winner of the 2011 National Academy of Sciences Book Award
- Named One of the Best Books of the Year by: *The New York Times Book Review*, NPR, *Financial Times*, *New York, Independent (U.K.)*, *Times (U.K.)*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Booklist*, and more

MEDIA AND RESOURCES

- [Educator Guide](#)
- [First-Year & Common Reading Guide](#)

RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

- [Henrietta Lacks biographer responds to parent who tried to ban it from schools for being ‘pornographic’](#) (2015)

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