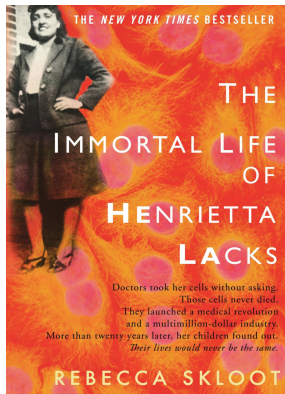


SUMMER READING GUIDE

This guide is designed to help readers analyze the major literary elements and themes in Rebecca Skloot's nonfiction narrative. Use it alongside your reading to develop a deeper understanding of the text.

***The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot**



Directions: After reading this memoir, **please respond to five** out of the ten discussion questions and then **choose one of the Multimedia Resources to explore and give a summary of your findings.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Skloot (born 1972) is an American science writer who specializes in narrative science writing and frequently explores topics related to ethics, medical research, and racial disparities in healthcare. Born in Springfield, Illinois, Skloot initially struggled in school, failing ninth grade due to poor attendance before attending an alternative high school and taking courses at Portland Community College, where she first learned about Henrietta Lacks.

After working as a veterinary technician, Skloot studied biology at Colorado State University, intending to pursue veterinary medicine. Her career path changed when she discovered her passion for writing during classes taken to fulfill university requirements. Despite having a novelist father (Floyd Skloot), Rebecca hadn't considered writing as a career until this point. After graduating with a degree in biology, she earned an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Pittsburgh.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks (2010), Skloot's first book, took over a decade to research and write. The book became an immediate bestseller, spending more than 75 weeks on The New York Times bestseller list, and was adapted into an HBO film starring Oprah Winfrey in 2017. Following the book's publication, Skloot established the Henrietta Lacks Foundation, which provides financial assistance to individuals who have contributed to scientific research without their knowledge or consent.

BOOK SUMMARY

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks tells the remarkable story of Henrietta Lacks, a poor Black tobacco farmer whose cells—taken without her knowledge in 1951—became one of the most important tools in medical research. Known as HeLa cells, they were the first "immortal" human cells grown in culture and are still alive today, though Henrietta died of aggressive cervical cancer shortly after her diagnosis at age 31.

The narrative skillfully weaves together three interconnected stories: the tale of Henrietta's life and death; the scientific journey of her cells, which have contributed to countless medical breakthroughs including the polio vaccine, gene mapping, and cancer research; and the impact of this unwitting "immortality" on her descendants, particularly her daughter Deborah, who knew little about her mother but desperately wanted to understand her legacy.

Through meticulous reporting and sensitive storytelling, Skloot explores the collision between ethics, race, and medicine; the dark history of experimentation on African Americans; the birth of bioethics; and the legal battles over whether we control the stuff we're made of. The book raises profound questions about who owns our bodies, the exploitation of vulnerable populations in medical research, and the stark divide between those who profit from scientific advancement and those who unknowingly make it possible.

KEY THEMES

1. Medical Ethics and Informed Consent

The book explores the evolution of medical ethics over time, particularly regarding informed consent. When Henrietta's cells were taken in 1951, it was common practice for doctors to use patient tissues in research without permission. The narrative traces how this practice has changed and raises questions about who owns biological materials once they've been removed from our bodies.

2. Racial and Socioeconomic Inequalities in Healthcare

Henrietta's story is inextricably tied to the history of racial discrimination in American medicine. As a poor Black woman in the segregated South, she received care in the "colored ward" of Johns Hopkins Hospital, one of the few places that would treat African American patients. The

book contextualizes her experience within the larger history of medical racism, including unethical experiments like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

3. Exploitation vs. Scientific Progress

The narrative raises complex questions about the tension between scientific advancement and individual rights. While HeLa cells have undoubtedly contributed to lifesaving medical breakthroughs, they were obtained through exploitative means, and Henrietta's family received no compensation despite the cells becoming a multi-billion-dollar industry.

4. Family, Identity, and Legacy

For the Lacks family, particularly Henrietta's daughter Deborah, understanding the story of HeLa cells becomes a way to connect with their mother and reclaim her legacy. The book explores how scientific immortality interacts with personal memory and family history.

5. Science Journalism and Narrative Ethics

Through her own presence in the story, Skloot examines the ethics of journalism and storytelling. She reflects on her responsibility to the Lacks family and the challenges of gaining their trust after years of exploitation by journalists, researchers, and others seeking to profit from Henrietta's story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the book's structure—alternating between Henrietta's story, the scientific developments involving HeLa cells, and Skloot's journey with Deborah—enhance your understanding of the narrative? What would be lost if the book focused on only one of these threads?
2. Discuss the concept of "informed consent" as it appears throughout the book. How has our understanding of informed consent changed since the 1950s? What factors complicated the Lacks family's understanding of what happened to Henrietta's cells?
3. Skloot writes, "Like many doctors of his era, TeLinde often used patients from the public wards for research, usually without their knowledge." How does economic status affect access to healthcare both in the 1950s and today? How might this relate to issues of consent and ethics?
4. The book describes numerous instances of medical experimentation on vulnerable populations throughout history. How do these examples help contextualize the Lacks family's distrust of medical institutions and researchers?

5. What role does race play in the story of Henrietta Lacks and HeLa cells? How does the history of racism in medicine affect the Lacks family's interactions with the medical establishment?
6. Deborah says, "If you pretty up how things really happened, that's dishonest... Like you're pretending everything is OK." How does Skloot approach the challenge of telling difficult truths while remaining respectful to the Lacks family?
7. How do Henrietta's cells force us to reconsider our ideas about death, immortality, and the boundary between self and other? What does it mean to be "immortal" in the way that Henrietta has become immortal?
8. Consider Deborah's reaction to learning about her mother's cells: "They're mine and they're famous, and I can't even afford to see a doctor." What does this statement reveal about the economic and social inequities embedded in scientific advancement?
9. How does Skloot position herself within the narrative? Discuss the ethical challenges she faced in researching and writing this book, and how she navigated her relationship with the Lacks family.
10. The Lacks family had strong religious beliefs that informed their understanding of Henrietta's cells. How do science and faith interact throughout the book? Are they always in conflict?

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Narrative Structure and Point of View

Skloot employs a complex narrative structure that braids together three distinct timelines: Henrietta's life and death in the 1950s; the scientific developments involving HeLa cells from the 1950s forward; and Skloot's own research journey with Deborah from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This non-linear approach allows her to create meaningful juxtapositions between past and present, highlighting continuities in racial and economic disparities while also showing changes in medical ethics over time.

The book also shifts between different narrative voices. When recounting historical events about Henrietta and HeLa cells, Skloot uses a third-person omniscient perspective, drawing on extensive research and interviews. When describing her interactions with the Lacks family, she writes in the first person, acknowledging her own role in the story. This dual perspective allows her to both reconstruct historical scenes with authority and reflect on her own position as a white journalist writing about a Black family's experience.

Symbolism and Motifs

HeLa Cells

The cells themselves function as the central symbol of the book, representing both scientific progress and human exploitation. Their "immortality" contrasts poignantly with Henrietta's tragically short life, while their widespread distribution (growing by the tons in laboratories worldwide) creates an eerie parallel to how Henrietta's story has been scattered and fragmented.

Documentation and Records

Throughout the book, medical records, photographs, and other documents serve as tangible connections to Henrietta's life. Deborah's collection of her mother's photos and documents symbolizes her attempt to reconstruct her mother's identity and reclaim her narrative.

Light and Seeing

Metaphors of visibility and invisibility recur throughout the text. Henrietta's life remained largely invisible while her cells were seen by countless researchers. The microscopes that allow scientists to see her cells contrast with the blindness of the medical establishment to her humanity.

Genre and Style

Skloot blends elements of investigative journalism, biography, science writing, and memoir to create a hybrid text that defies easy categorization. Her prose style shifts from clear, accessible explanations of complex scientific concepts to more lyrical, intimate passages describing personal moments with the Lacks family. This stylistic flexibility allows her to serve as both educator and storyteller, making the scientific content accessible while honoring the emotional weight of the human story.

COMPARATIVE READING

Consider exploring these works alongside *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* for a deeper understanding of its themes:

- **"Medical Apartheid" by Harriet A. Washington** - Provides a comprehensive history of medical experimentation on African Americans
- **"The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down" by Anne Fadiman** - Explores cross-cultural misunderstandings in medicine
- **"The Emperor of All Maladies" by Siddhartha Mukherjee** - Offers a "biography" of cancer that complements the medical aspects of Skloot's book
- **"Behind the Beautiful Forevers" by Katherine Boo** - Another example of immersive narrative nonfiction that examines social inequality
- **"The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: An Insiders' Account of the Shocking Medical Experiment Conducted by Government Doctors Against African American Men"**

by **Fred D. Gray** - Provides context for the history of medical racism referenced in Skloot's book

MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

- **HBO film adaptation** (2017) starring Oprah Winfrey as Deborah Lacks and Rose Byrne as Rebecca Skloot
- **Radio Lab episode**: "Henrietta's Tumor" (2010)
- **TED Talk**: "**The Immortal Cells of Henrietta Lacks**" by Robin Bulleri
- **Johns Hopkins Medicine website**: Features information about their relationship with the Lacks family and HeLa cells
- **The Henrietta Lacks Foundation website**: Contains updated information about the Lacks family and ongoing work to address issues raised in the book

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Medical Research in the Mid-20th Century

Understanding the historical context of medical research in the 1950s helps contextualize the ethical issues raised in the book:

- The Nuremberg Code establishing principles for ethical human experimentation was only established in 1947, just four years before Henrietta's cells were taken
- Standardized requirements for informed consent were not established until decades later
- Racial segregation was still legal in healthcare settings like Johns Hopkins Hospital
- There were no regulations regarding ownership of human tissues used in research

The Legacy of HeLa Cells in Science

Key scientific advances made possible by HeLa cells include:

- Development of the polio vaccine
- Cancer and HIV/AIDS research
- In vitro fertilization techniques
- Gene mapping
- Effects of radiation and toxic substances
- Development of drugs for treating numerous diseases

This reading guide was prepared for summer 2025 literary exploration and analysis of Rebecca Skloot's "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks."

