

#1 Book Summary: The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, by Rebecca Skloot

by Allen Cheng

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Want to learn the ideas in The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks better than ever? Read the world's #1 book summary of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot here.

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Video Summaries of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

We've scoured the Internet for the very best videos on The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, from high-quality videos summaries to interviews or commentary by Rebecca Skloot.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJZS9L4_iTs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-jxEX1XQpY>

1-Page Summary of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Overall Summary

A journalist named Rebecca Skloot recounts a story about Henrietta Lacks, who was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951. Her cancer cells were then taken and used to create the first human cell line called HeLa. The author explains that these cells have been used for research on some of the most important scientific discoveries of our time, but we know very little about Henrietta herself. She then introduces Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's daughter, and tells us how she got involved in this project.

Rebecca explains that Henrietta was first told she was fine, but eventually discovered she had cancer and received radiation treatment. Rebecca then describes Johns Hopkins as a leading hospital in the country that treated African Americans differently than white patients. She traces Henrietta's lineage back to Clover, Virginia where Day and Henrietta met and married. They had two children: Elsie who suffered from mental illness and died at Crownsville Asylum.

Rebecca talks about the research on cervical cancer treatments in the 1950s, as well as cell culturing. Doctors were trying to create a breed of human cells that would regenerate indefinitely, but they weren't having much success. Then one doctor got some samples from Henrietta's tissue and her cancer cells began growing at an extraordinary rate. However, Henrietta continued to decline even though her tumor

was growing rapidly.

In 1999, Rebecca Skloot begins trying to contact the Lacks family. She is helped by a professor who knows them but fears she's another exploitative white journalist. After calling Deborah every day for a year and getting two brothers on the line as well, George Gey starts publicizing HeLa cells and sending it to researchers around the world without any financial gain. Meanwhile Henrietta gets worse until doctors say her tumor is inoperable.

Rebecca travels to Baltimore, where the Lacks family lives. She meets Courtney Speed, who is determined to make Henrietta's story known. Rebecca continues her search for the Lacks family and finally finds them. The family refuses to meet with Rebecca at first but later agrees after much persuasion from Speed. Meanwhile in 1951, doctors at Hopkins ask Day if they can autopsy his wife's body so that they can study her cells further. Her husband buries her in an unmarked grave without letting anyone know where she was buried or what happened to her body afterwards. However, HeLa (the name given by scientists) continues thriving and aiding researchers all over the world with their various experiments on human cells, leading up to the polio vaccine and many other breakthroughs in medicine through studying its properties and effects on humans; it also leads to a mass production of human cells used for research purposes around the world today. Scientists begin using HeLa as a tool for studies regarding viruses, genetics, drugs, environmental stress, vitamins etc., making it one of the most important tools available today. Journalists start wondering about who Henrietta really was because of how famous HeLa had become due to its success as a research tool; some even mistakenly call her Helen Lane instead of Henrietta Lacks.

Henrietta Lacks' children are abused by their cousin. Henrietta's youngest child, Joe, is the most affected and becomes a delinquent. Rebecca continues to explore her family history and notices that there were two groups of people in her family: white Lackses who owned plantations and black Lackses who were enslaved on those plantations.

We learn about Chester Southam, who injected cancer cells into patients without their knowledge. This case started a debate over medical consent and eventually led to his reprimanding by the New York Medical Board of Regents. As this conflict raged on, HeLa became more widespread and contaminated hundreds of other cell lines.

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