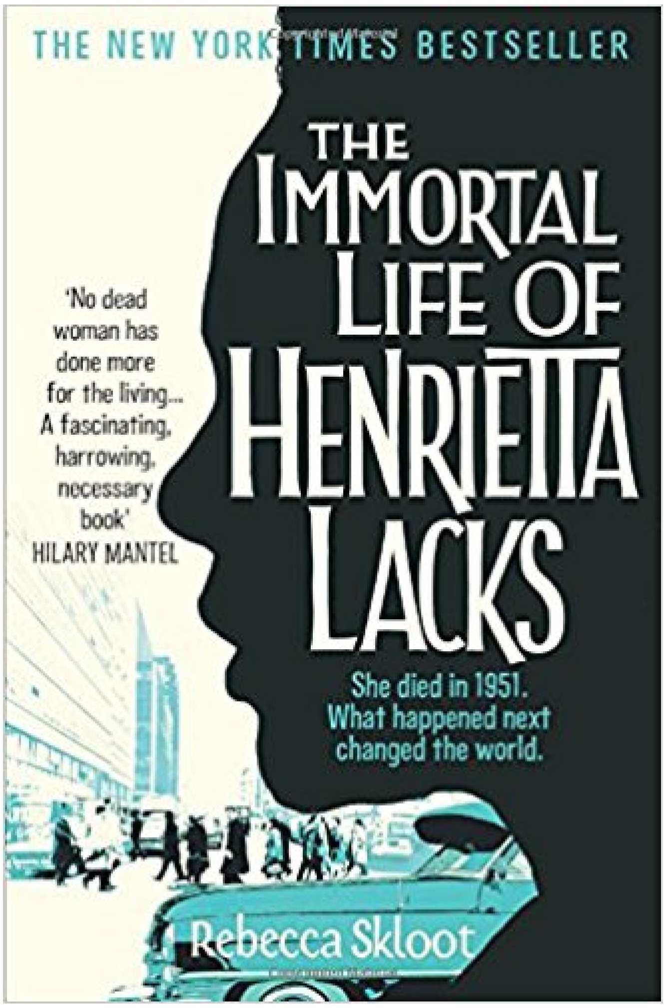
Immortal Life Of Henrietta Lacks



Synopsis

Her name was Henrietta Lacks, but scientists know her as HeLa. Born a poor black tobacco farmer, her cancer cells - taken without her knowledge - became a multimillion-dollar industry and one of the most important tools in medicine. Yet Henrietta’s family did not learn of her ’immortality’ until more than twenty years after her death, with devastating consequences ...Balancing the beauty and drama of scientific discovery with dark questions about who owns the stuff our bodies are made of, "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" is an extraordinary journey in search of the soul and story of a real woman, whose cells live on today in all four corners of the world. "A fascinating, harrowing, necessary book". (Hilary Mantel, "Guardian"). "A heartbreaking account of racism and injustice". ("Metro"). "A fine book...a gripping read...The book has deservedly been a huge bestseller in the US. It should be here, too". ("Sunday Times").

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Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, February 2010: From a single, abbreviated life grew a seemingly immortal line of cells that made some of the most crucial innovations in modern science possible. And from that same life, and those cells, Rebecca Skloot has fashioned in The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks a fascinating and moving story of medicine and family, of how life is sustained in laboratories and in memory. Henrietta Lacks was a mother of five in Baltimore, a poor African American migrant from the tobacco farms of Virginia, who died from a cruelly aggressive cancer at the age of 30 in 1951. A sample of her cancerous tissue, taken without her knowledge or consent, as was the custom then, turned out to provide one of the holy grails of mid-century biology: human cells that could survive--even thrive--in the lab. Known as HeLa cells, their stunning potency gave scientists a building block for countless breakthroughs, beginning with the cure for polio. Meanwhile, Henrietta's family continued to live in poverty and frequently poor health, and their discovery decades later of her unknowing contribution--and her cells' strange survival--left them full of pride, anger, and suspicion. For a decade, Skloot doggedly but compassionately gathered the threads of these stories, slowly gaining the trust of the family while helping them learn the truth about Henrietta, and with their aid she tells a rich and haunting story that asks the questions, Who owns our bodies? And who carries our memories? --Tom Nissley   Exclusive: Jad Abumrad Reviews The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks   Jad Abumrad is host and creator of the public radio hit Radiolab, now in its seventh season and reaching over a million people monthly. Radiolab combines cutting-edge production with a philosophical approach to big ideas in science and beyond, and an inventive method of storytelling. Abumrad has won numerous awards, including a National Headliner Award in Radio and an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science Journalism Award. Read his exclusive guest review of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks: Honestly, I can't imagine a better tale. A detective story that's at once mythically large and painfully intimate. Just the simple facts are hard to believe: that in 1951, a poor black woman named Henrietta Lacks dies of cervical cancer, but pieces of the tumor that killed her--taken without her knowledge or consent--live on, first in one lab, then in hundreds, then thousands, then in giant factories churning out polio vaccines, then aboard rocket ships launched into space. The cells from this one tumor would spawn a multi-billion dollar industry and become a foundation of modern science--leading to breakthroughs in gene mapping, cloning and fertility and helping to discover how viruses work and how cancer develops (among a million other things). All of which is to say: the science end of this story is enough to blow one's mind right out of one's face. But what's truly remarkable about Rebecca Skloot's book is that we also get the rest of the story, the part that could have easily remained hidden had she not spent ten years unearthing it: Who was Henrietta Lacks? How did she live? How she did die? Did her family know that she'd become, in some sense, immortal, and how did that affect them? These are crucial questions, because science should never forget the people who gave it life. And so, what unfolds is not only a reporting tour de force but also a very entertaining account of Henrietta, her ancestors, her cells and the scientists who grew them. The book ultimately channels its journey of discovery though Henrietta's youngest daughter, Deborah, who never knew her mother, and who dreamt of one day being a scientist. As Deborah Lacks and Skloot search for answers, we're bounced effortlessly from the tiny tobacco-farming Virginia hamlet of Henrietta's childhood to modern-day Baltimore, where Henrietta's family remains. Along the way, a series of unforgettable juxtapositions: cell culturing bumps into faith healings, cutting edge medicine collides with the dark truth that Henrietta’s family can’t afford the health insurance to care for diseases their mother’s cells have helped to cure. Rebecca Skloot tells the story with great sensitivity, urgency and, in the end, damn fine writing. I highly recommend this book. --Jad Abumrad Look Inside The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Click on thumbnails for larger images   Henrietta and David Lacks, circa 1945. Elsie Lacks, Henriettaâ ™s older daughter, about five years before she was committed to Crownsville State Hospital, with a diagnosis of â œidiocy.â • Deborah Lacks at about age four. The home-house where Henrietta was raised, a four-room log cabin in Clover, Virginia, that once served as slave quarters. (1999) Main Street in downtown Clover, Virginia, where Henrietta was raised, circa 1930s.   Margaret Gey and Minnie, a lab technician, in the Gey lab at Hopkins, circa 1951. Deborah with her children, LaTonya and Alfred, and her second husband, James Pullum, in the mid-1980s. In 2001, Deborah developed a severe case of hives after learning upsetting new information about her mother and sister. Deborah and her cousin Gary Lacks standing in front of drying tobacco, 2001. The Lacks family in 2009.   --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review. Science journalist Skloot makes a remarkable debut with this multilayered story about faith, science, journalism, and grace. It is also a tale of medical wonders and medical arrogance, racism, poverty and the bond that grows, sometimes painfully, between two very different womenâ ”Skloot and Deborah Lacksâ ”sharing an obsession to learn about Deborah’s mother, Henrietta, and her magical, immortal cells. Henrietta Lacks was a 31-year-old black mother of five in Baltimore when she died of cervical cancer in 1951. Without her knowledge, doctors treating her at Johns Hopkins took tissue samples from her cervix for research. They spawned the first viable, indeed miraculously productive, cell lineâ ”known as HeLa. These cells have aided in medical discoveries from the polio vaccine to AIDS treatments. What Skloot so poignantly portrays is the devastating impact Henrietta’s death and the eventual importance of her cells had on her husband and children. Skloot’s portraits of Deborah, her father and brothers are so vibrant and immediate they recall Adrian Nicole LeBlanc’s Random Family. Writing in plain, clear prose, Skloot avoids melodrama and makes no judgments. Letting people and events speak for themselves, Skloot tells a rich, resonant tale of modern science, the wonders it can perform and how easily it can exploit society’s most vulnerable people. (Feb.) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I ordered this book to read for one of my Ethics classes. I was worried about so much assigned reading to complete in one week, but it turned out to be a book that you just can’t put down.It still amazes me that this is a woman’s real life story, the story of her family, and how they have impacted science and anyone who works or benefits from the use of cellular research. That means just about every single person is connected to Henrietta in one way or another.This was a great book that I’m so glad I read. I learned a lot and it kept me entertained and fascinated for days. It will really change your perspective and make you appreciate this woman’s contribution to our scientific and health fields.

From the very beginning there was something uncanny about the cancer cells on Henrietta LacksÃ¢Â Â™s cervix. Even before killing Lacks herself in 1951, they took on a life of their own. Removed during a biopsy and cultured without her permission, the HeLa cells (named from the first two letters of her first and last names) reproduced boisterously in a lab at Johns Hopkins Ã¢Â Â” the first human cells ever to do so. HeLa became an instant biological celebrity, traveling to research labs all over the world. Meanwhile Lacks, a vivacious 31-year-old African-American who had once been a tobacco farmer, tended her five children and endured scarring radiation treatments in the hospitalÃ¢Â Â™s Ã¢Â ÂœcoloredÃ¢Â Â• ward.In Ã¢Â ÂœThe Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,Ã¢Â Â• Rebecca Skloot introduces us to the Ã¢Â Âœreal live woman,Ã¢Â Â• the children who survived her, and the interplay of race, poverty, science and one of the most important medical discoveries of the last 100 years. Skloot narrates the science lucidly, tracks the racial politics of medicine thoughtfully and tells the Lacks familyÃ¢Â Â™s often painful history with grace. She also confronts the spookiness of the cells themselves, intrepidly crossing into the spiritual plane on which the family has come to understand their motherÃ¢Â Â™s continued presence in the world. Science writing is often just about Ã¢Â Âœthe facts.Ã¢Â Â• Ã Â- SklootÃ¢Â Â™s book, her first, is far deeper, braver and more wonderful.This work has the most human of stories at its core, and never deviates from that important, and often heartbreaking, humanity. When science appears, it does so effortlessly, with explanations of cell anatomy or techniques like Ã¢Â Âœfluorescence in situ hybridizationÃ¢Â Â• seamlessly worked into descriptions of the coloured wards of Johns Hopkins hospital to LacksÃ¢Â Â™s hometown of Clover, Virginia.But The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is not a comfortable read. I visibly winced at descriptions of HenriettaÃ¢Â Â™s blackened, burned skin after multiple rounds of devastating radiation treatments. I put the book down with a heavy sigh after reading about the experiments that black Americans have been unwittingly subjected to over the years. I cried twice, at events that I canÃ¢Â Â™t talk about without seriously spoiling the book. But it is uplifting too, particularly in a stand-out chapter where HenriettaÃ¢Â Â™s children, Deborah and Zakariyya, visit a cancer researcher to see their motherÃ¢Â Â™s cells under a microscope.All of this is to be expected of a book that refuses to shy away from tackling important themes Ã¢Â Â“ the interplay between science and ethics, the question of who owns our bodies, and the history of racism in the US. And yet for all its grand scope, skilful writing and touching compassion, there is one simple element that makes As a final thought, I was struck by the parallels between HenriettaÃ¢Â Â™s cells and her story. HenriettaÃ¢Â Â™s entire family history was eventually condensed into a small sliver of cells that you could carry in a glass vial. They have achieved immortality, used by scientists throughout the world. Similarly, her entire life has been condensed into a moving tale and an exceptional book that you could read in a comfortable day. By right, it will achieve the same immortal status.

Skloot has done an amazingly thorough job researching the life of Henrietta Lacks. Is it okay to take tissue samples to further the cause of scientific research if it can save lives? I see no problem with it, but for Henrietta’s family, it didn’t seem right. For people with medical backgrounds, this would be a compelling read. For me, I found the human interest side the best part of this story.

It was my hope in buying this book that I might expand my knowledge about cellular biology and research. The words "cell" and "immortality" raise a bevy of "popular science" questions that I find fantastically tantalizing. However, readers of the book should be prepared more for a cultural and historical discussion than hints at futuristic research. Fortunately, I enjoy historical and social science books as well. One of the things I found most interesting about this book was the view it gave me into a part of the US that I have never known, both in historical and modern terms. I had no idea about the level of mistrust and resentment toward the government and large institutions born by people represented in the book by Henrietta’s family. The book made me respect their perspective, which would otherwise have been foreign to me. It even sparked a moments of indignance that a family or a community could be so ill-served by a system to which they had clearly made a valuable contribution. I appreciated that the book served to give voice to the people whose lives it narrated, and even to financially serve the Lacks family with an educational scholarship.

I enjoyed this book thoroughly. The waves created from this one single cell line is fascinating - from the obvious research and drug development to the resultant health care policy improvements and divisiveness regarding privacy - this is a well told and undersold story.The author has a knack for explaining a fairly involved and dry science to the average reader in such a way to make it understandable. She also treats the family with respect as well as offers understanding to the scientific community (and that must have been difficult to do at times).Great read.

I could not put this book down! It raises so many current issues; beautifully weaves historical, cultural and scientific trends into a comprehensive utterly compelling, easily understood story, which is factual. My doctor was astounded when I began to discuss the material at my recent physical. Topics raised: Women’s healthcare, African-American healthcare, truth/disclosure in medicine, genetic cloning, ownership of genetic material, health education and more. Simply a must read for anyone.

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