



THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS

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ABSTRACT

This is an extraordinary book, a mix of memoir, social history and science. But above all it is a biography of a woman whose importance has long outlived the circumstances of her life. Skloot spends too long with Henrietta's family, but she is clearly fulfilling a promise to them. This biography ensures that she will never again be reduced to cells in a Petri dish: she will always be Henrietta as well as HeLa

Key words:

Henrietta's Life, Ethics, Science, Immortal

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INTRODUCTION

'No dead woman has done more for the living...A fascinating, harrowing, necessary Book'

'Moving and magnificent.....a heart-breaking account of racism and injustice'

More than 50 million tonnes of HeLa cells have been grown in the past six decades. They have contributed to 5 of the past 10 Nobel prizes for medicine. Long fascinated by HeLa's contribution to science, Skloot set out a decade ago to give a human face to the woman who made it possible. Cancer cells taken from her body before her death have never stopped growing and are multiplying as a whole today in laboratories all over the world. That she archived with enthusiasm, creating a vivid portrait of lacks that should be as abiding as her cells.

Henrietta Lacks (30 yrs) sought help in 1951 at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore for what she called a "knot" on her cervix. She was diagnosed with cervical cancer and treated with radium and x-ray therapy.

The various aspects of book are explained as follows:

Affliction

Skloot deals with some of the worst kinds of misery we can imagine. There's the fallout of slavery and the consequences of institutionalized racism. There's the potentially eternal cycle of poverty abuse, the lack of a formal education and lack of opportunity that goes with it.

Woman (Henrietta) who died from cervical cancer and had her tissues co-opted by biotech companies.

Morality and Ethics

The harvesting of cancer cells from Henrietta Lacks' tumor seems like no big deal. In this book, Skloot says that "donating" tissues implies consent on the part of patient or family which emphasized on autonomy of patient during scientific research. During Henrietta time, right to self-determination was not clearly formulated as per now days recommendations of the Nuremburg Code Helsinki Declaration, ICMR ethical guidelines etc.

Immortal

Scientists use the word immortality to mean everlasting life in a test tube. But, in this book, when the Lacks family hears that Henrietta has achieved immortality, they have something completely different in mind. Maybe the researchers understood that cellular immortality is the closest humanity will ever get to the real thing.

Science

The science behind the production and use of HeLa cells leads development of standard culture medium and lab protocols all stemmed directly from George Gey's lab which were used in formation of various drugs, vaccination etc.

Race

Race affects the Lacks family's access to healthcare and education and how the scientific community treats them. Because this largely white community can't even care what the Lacks family needs in order to understand HeLa, researchers cause a lot of harm and anxiety. It influenced the relationship

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between doctor and patient and fuelled unethical scientific research.

Family

The idea of family is also a strong motivator in the story of Henrietta's children. They work hard to overcome poverty, fear and anxiety to learn the truth about their mother's life. They learn that while HeLa cells guarantee that Henrietta a glimpse of immortality lies with the memories of next generation.

Poverty

In this book, poverty boils down to two things: *limited access to basic human necessities and vulnerability to predatory behaviour*. We learn that both of these things are worse when you factor in racial prejudice. Even at Johns Hopkins Hospital, black patients didn't have equal access to health care. Poverty also meant lack of education.

CONCLUSION

In 'The Immortal of Henrietta Lacks's Rebecca Skloot introduces us to the "real live woman," the children who survived her, the interplay of faith, cancer, racism, poverty, science, ethics, suffering and one of the most important medical discoveries of the last 100 years. Skloot's book is far deeper, braver and more wonderful emphasized on ethical issue of taking informed consent of patient in order to maintain principle of autonomy.

This book could be read by various readers such as young students, all adults, researchers, bioethicists, legal advisors etc.

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