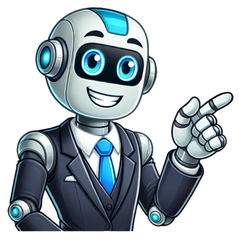
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Ambassador Book Awards are given each year to authors whose new works have made an exceptional contribution to interpreting the life and culture of the United States. A committee of writers, editors, and former publishers selects the winning books, copies of which are sent to ESUs around the world by participating ESU Branches throughout the United States. At the annual Ambassador Book Awards ceremony, the winning authors are invited to discuss their works at ESU Headquarters in New York.Categories for selection of the books are: Fiction, Biography & Autobiography, Poetry and American Studies.Decided by voting open to all members of Goodreads, the Goodreads Choice Awards are the only major book awards chosen by readers. Voting in 20 categories happens in November, and the winners are announced in December. The GCAs launched in 2009.Goodreads analyzes statistics from the hundreds of millions of books added, rated, and reviewed on the site to select 15 worthy nominees in 20 categories. Write-in votes are also accepted during the Opening Round so readers can vote for exactly the book they want. In this way, receiving a Goodreads Choice nomination is truly an honor that comes straight from the readers. Welcome to the fascinating world of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, a book that takes you on an extraordinary journey through science, ethics, and the personal stories that intertwine with them. Written by Rebecca Skloot, this non-fiction masterpiece shines a light on the life of Henrietta Lacks, a woman whose cells were taken without her knowledge in the early 1950s. These cells, known as HeLa cells, became one of the most important tools in medicine, vital for developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and more. Rebecca Skloot, a science journalist with a deep curiosity about the intersection of research and ethics, spent over a decade researching and writing this book. Her dedication to uncovering the truth behind the HeLa cells and telling the Lacks familys story brings a unique perspective to this narrative, making it not just a book about scientific achievements but also a profound exploration of racial and ethical issues in medical research. The genre of this book blurs the lines between biography, science, and ethical inquiry, offering readers an engaging and thought-provoking look at the complexities of medical research and its impact on individuals and their families. So, lets dive into the incredible story of Henrietta Lacks and her immortal legacy. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks unfolds a story that bridges the gap between the scientific community and a familys quest for understanding and justice. Heres how the narrative progresses: Exposition The book introduces us to Henrietta Lacks, a young Black woman diagnosed with cervical cancer in the 1950s. Without her consent, doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital collect her cancer cells during treatment. These cells, unlike any before, have the unique ability to survive and reproduce indefinitely in a lab setting. Rising Action Henriettas cells, named HeLa cells, revolutionize medical research, contributing to significant scientific advancements such as the polio vaccine and space travel experiments. Meanwhile, Henriettas family remains unaware of the legacy her cells have created, living without knowledge of the significant contribution and without receiving any financial benefits from the profits made off HeLa cell research. Climax The heart of the narrative is when Henriettas family discovers, decades later, the truth about HeLa cells. The revelation comes with complex emotions, as they grapple with the reality that part of Henrietta has achieved immortality, while they face financial and health struggles. Falling Action As the Lacks family begins to question the ethics of the medical research community, Rebecca Skloot enters their lives. She seeks to tell their story, bridging the gap between the familys personal ordeal and the scientific communitys detachment from the human stories behind the specimens. Resolution The book doesnt offer a neat conclusion but rather presents an ongoing dialogue about ethics, race, and consent in medical research. Through her narrative, Skloot brings Henrietta Lacks story to the forefront, prompting a reevaluation of practices in the scientific community and sparking discussions on the rights of individuals in research. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is more than a recount of historical events; its a narrative that challenges readers to consider the moral dimensions of scientific discovery and the often overlooked personal stories behind it. In The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot introduces us to a range of compelling characters, each with their distinct personalities, motivations, and developments. Heres a closer look at some of the main characters: Henrietta Lacks Henrietta is the cornerstone of the story, a poor Black tobacco farmer whose cells were taken without her consent. Her enduring legacy through HeLa cells contrasts with her short, tumultuous life filled with hardship. Henrietta is depicted posthumously through the recollections of her family and the scientific community, symbolizing the intersection of science, ethics, and race. Deborah Lacks Deborah, Henriettas youngest daughter, serves as a central figure in the narrative. Her quest to learn about the mother she never knew and understand the significance of HeLa cells drives much of the story. Deborahs journey is emotional and complex, marked by a deep longing for connection and a sense of justice for her familys ordeal. Rebecca Skloot The author of the book, Rebecca is also a character in her own narrative. Her role is that of a mediator between the Lacks family and the readers. Skloots persistent pursuit of the story, her ethical considerations in dealing with the Lacks family, and her reflection on the process of telling their story add a meta-layer to the narrative, emphasizing the importance of storytelling in understanding history and ethics. George Gey The scientist who first cultured Henriettas cells, Gey is portrayed as a pioneering figure in medical research. His breakthrough with HeLa cells represents the dual nature of scientific discovery: the potential for great advancement and the ethical dilemmas that can arise from it. Day Lacks Henriettas husband, known as Day, represents the personal impact of Henriettas story. His life and struggles highlight the socio-economic and emotional toll on the Lacks family, compounded by the complex legacy of HeLa cells. Heres a summary table of their character analysis: CharacterPersonality/MotivationDevelopmentHenrietta LacksSymbolic, enduringPosthumous impact and legacyDeborah LacksEmotional, determinedGrows in understanding and advocacyRebecca SklootPersistent, ethicalDeepens her connection and understanding of the Lacks familyGeorge GeyInnovative, morally ambiguousEmbodies the ethical complexities of scientific discoveryDay LacksStruggling, overshadowedReflects the personal and familial impact of Henriettas legacy This analysis reveals the rich tapestry of personal and ethical narratives that Skloot weaves together, demonstrating the complexity of the individuals involved in and affected by the story of HeLa cells. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot is rich with themes and symbols that contribute significantly to the overall meaning of the story. Lets explore some of the major themes and symbols: Ethics in Scientific Research The book critically examines the ethics of using human cells for research without consent. It questions the morality of benefiting from someones biological material without their knowledge or benefit to their family, highlighting the need for ethical standards in medical research. Race and Socioeconomic Inequality The exploitation of Henrietta Lacks, a poor Black woman, and the subsequent neglect of her family, underscores the issues of racial and socioeconomic inequality. The story illustrates how marginalized groups are often exploited for scientific advancement with little to no recognition or compensation. Family and Identity Through the Lacks familys journey, the book explores themes of identity, connection, and the search for understanding ones heritage. It shows how Henriettas legacy impacts her familys sense of identity and their quest for recognition and justice. Immortality and Legacy Henriettas cells achieve a form of immortality, living on in scientific research long after her death. This theme reflects on the concept of legacy and how ones contributions can outlive their physical existence, influencing generations to come.HeLa Cells The HeLa cells themselves are a powerful symbol of life, death, and immortality. They represent Henriettas physical legacy, raising questions about the ownership and use of ones body and its parts. The Flower Garden Henriettas love for her flower garden symbolizes her care and nurturing nature, contrasting with the clinical and utilitarian way her cells are treated and utilized in the scientific community. Photographs Photos in the book serve as symbols of memory and identity. They are crucial for the Lacks family in remembering Henrietta and for the readers in connecting with the real individuals behind the story. Medical Records and Documents These symbolize the dehumanization of patients in medical research, reducing individuals to data points and specimens without considering their humanity or the ethical implications. Through these themes and symbols, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks weaves a complex narrative that interrogates the intersections of science, ethics, race, and human rights, compelling readers to consider the human stories behind scientific advancements. In The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot masterfully blends multiple genres and styles, navigating between scientific explanation, biographical narrative, and ethical inquiry. Her approach is multifaceted, reflecting the complex nature of the story she tells. Heres an exploration of the key elements of her writing style and tone: Journalistic Integrity Skloots background in science journalism is evident in her meticulous research and commitment to presenting the facts. She combines thorough investigation with a narrative style that brings the characters and their stories to life, ensuring accuracy while engaging the readers emotions and intellect. Personal Engagement Unlike traditional scientific writing, Skloot involves herself in the narrative, sharing her experiences and the process of uncovering the story. This personal engagement adds depth to the narrative, allowing readers to see the impact of the story on those involved, including the author herself. Ethical Reflection Throughout the book, Skloot doesnt shy away from posing hard ethical questions, reflecting on the morality of scientific practices and the exploitation of individuals. This reflective tone encourages readers to think critically about the implications of scientific advancements and the importance of consent and ethical standards. Empathetic Portrayal Skloot portrays the Lacks family with empathy and respect, giving voice to their experiences, struggles, and perspectives. Her empathetic tone helps bridge the gap between the scientific community and the personal stories affected by scientific research. Educational Approach The book serves not only as a narrative but also as an educational resource, explaining complex scientific concepts and historical contexts in an accessible manner. Skloots ability to demystify scientific jargon and present information clearly is a testament to her skill as a science communicator.Descriptive and Vivid Imagery Skloot uses vivid imagery to describe settings, characters, and scientific procedures, making the story visually engaging and helping readers visualize the narrative. Inclusive Language The use of inclusive language fosters a sense of connection and empathy, making the story accessible to a wide audience, regardless of their background in science or familiarity with the topic. Balanced Narrative Skloot balances the scientific aspects of the story with personal narratives, ensuring that the book is both informative and deeply humanizing. Through her unique blend of styles and tones, Rebecca Skloot creates a compelling narrative that is as informative as it is moving, highlighting the importance of recognizing the human elements in scientific research. In The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot employs a variety of literary devices to enrich her storytelling and highlight the complex themes of her book. Here are the top 10 devices used: Metaphor Skloot frequently uses metaphors to draw comparisons between scientific concepts and everyday experiences, making complex ideas more relatable and understandable. For instance, she compares HeLa cells to immortal beings, emphasizing their ability to live indefinitely outside of Henriettas body. Imagery Vivid imagery is used to bring scenes to life, whether describing the vibrant colors of Henriettas home or the sterile environment of the lab. This helps readers visualize the settings and understand the stark contrasts between Henriettas world and the scientific community. Personification By attributing human characteristics to HeLa cells, Skloot adds depth to the narrative, making the cells almost a character in their own right. This personification highlights the unique nature of HeLa cells and their central role in the story. Juxtaposition Skloot juxtaposes the scientific achievements made possible by HeLa cells with the personal struggles of the Lacks family, highlighting the ethical complexities and human costs behind scientific progress. Flashback The narrative structure includes flashbacks to Henriettas life and the early days of HeLa cell research, providing context and background that enrich the story. This device helps bridge past and present, illustrating the long-lasting impact of Henriettas cells. Anecdotes Skloot includes anecdotes from the Lacks family and from her own experiences researching the book. These personal stories add authenticity and depth, making the narrative more engaging and relatable. Allusion The author alludes to historical events, scientific discoveries, and cultural references to situate Henriettas story within a broader context. These allusions help readers understand the significance of the story in the panorama of medical research and social history. Irony The irony of Henrietta Lacks cells achieving immortality, while her own family struggles with poverty and lack of recognition, is a poignant element of the book. This device underscores the disparities between the scientific communitys gains and the Lacks familys losses. Foreshadowing Skloot uses foreshadowing to hint at future revelations and conflicts, building suspense and keeping readers engaged. This technique is particularly effective in hinting at the ethical dilemmas and family dynamics that unfold throughout the book. Dialogue Realistic dialogue captures the voices of the Lacks family, scientists, and other key figures, adding authenticity and allowing readers to hear directly from the people involved. This device helps humanize the narrative, emphasizing the personal stories behind the scientific facts. These literary devices enhance the narrative of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, making it not only a compelling story about scientific discovery but also a profound exploration of ethics, family, and the human condition. For each of the top 10 literary devices used in The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, here are tables providing 3 examples and explanations: ExampleExplanationComparing HeLa cells to immortal beingsThis metaphor underscores the unique property of HeLa cells to reproduce indefinitely, highlighting the paradox of Henriettas death and her cells ongoing life.Henriettas home as a warm, living entityDescribes Henriettas home environment in a way that contrasts sharply with the clinical, cold lab settings, emphasizing the difference between Henriettas life and her posthumous existence.Science as a double-edged swordSuggests the dual nature of scientific progress, which can heal and harm, reflecting on the benefits and ethical dilemmas posed by the use of HeLa cells. ExampleExplanationThe vivid colors of Henriettas gardenBrings Henriettas personal space to life, showing her love for beauty and life, juxtaposed against the backdrop of her cells used in sterile lab environments.The description of the lab where HeLa cells were culturedCreates a visual contrast to the warmth and vibrancy of Henriettas life, highlighting the impersonal nature of scientific research.The depiction of Henriettas childrens experiencesPaints a vivid picture of their emotional landscape, making their struggles and responses to their mothers legacy more relatable and poignant. ExampleExplanationHeLa cells refusing to dieGives the cells a will of their own, emphasizing their extraordinary nature and the impact they have made on science and beyond.The cancer that invaded HenriettaPersonifies the disease, making it an antagonist in Henriettas story, which adds a dramatic and relatable element to her battle.Science reaching out to the futurePersonifies scientific endeavor as an active participant in shaping the future, reflecting on the legacy of Henriettas cells. ExampleExplanationHenriettas modest home life vs. the expansive use of her cellsHighlights the disparity between Henriettas personal, humble existence and the global, monumental impact of her cells.The Lacks familys ignorance of HeLas legacy vs. the scientific communitys deep involvementUnderscores the disconnect between the people directly affected by Henriettas cells and those benefiting from them.The joy of scientific discovery vs. the ethical dilemmas it createsShowcases the complex nature of scientific progress, where breakthroughs can lead to both positive advancements and moral quandaries. These examples illustrate how Rebecca Skloot uses literary devices to add depth and complexity to the narrative, making The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks a rich and multifaceted read. Q: Who was Henrietta Lacks?A: Henrietta Lacks was an African-American woman whose cancer cells were taken without her consent in 1951. These cells, known as HeLa cells, became the first immortal human cell line and have been instrumental in countless scientific breakthroughs. Q: What are HeLa cells, and why are they important?A: HeLa cells are the first human cells grown in a lab that could divide indefinitely. This made them invaluable for research in genetics, medicine, and numerous scientific advancements, including the development of the polio vaccine, cancer research, and AIDS treatment. Q: Did Henrietta Lacks know her cells were taken and used for research?A: No, Henrietta Lacks was not aware that her cells were taken for research purposes, nor did she give consent. This has sparked a significant ethical debate about consent and the use of human biological materials in research. Q: How did Henrietta Lacks family react when they found out about HeLa cells?A: Henrietta Lacks family was shocked and upset when they learned about the extensive use of HeLa cells decades later. They struggled with the realization of her contribution to science without her consent and without any compensation or recognition for many years. Q: What impact did the story of Henrietta Lacks have on medical ethics and patient consent?A: The story of Henrietta Lacks has had a profound impact on medical ethics, leading to increased awareness and changes in policies regarding patient consent, the use of human tissues in research, and the rights of individuals to their biological materials. Q: Can Henrietta Lacks family benefit financially from the use of HeLa cells?A: For a long time, Henrietta Lacks family did not receive any financial benefits from the use of HeLa cells. The ethical debate around the case has raised questions about compensation for the Lacks family, leading to ongoing discussions about the rights of donors and their families. Q: What is the main focus of Rebecca Skloots book about Henrietta Lacks?A: Rebecca Skloots book focuses on the life of Henrietta Lacks, the discovery and impact of HeLa cells, and the ethical issues surrounding her story. It also delves into the personal narratives of the Lacks family and their quest for recognition and justice. QuestionABCDWho was Henrietta Lacks?A scientistA teacherA tobacco farmerA nurseWhat are HeLa cells?A type of virusThe first immortal human cell lineA medicationA scientific instrumentWhere were Henriettas cells first cultured?Harvard UniversityJohns Hopkins HospitalUniversity of ChicagoMITWhy are HeLa cells significant?They are the largest cellsThey contain goldThey were the first to live and reproduce indefinitely in a labThey glow in the darkDid Henrietta Lacks consent to the use of her cells?Yes, verballyYes, in writingNoIts unclearWhat major medical advances were made possible by HeLa cells?The invention of the microscopeThe cure for the common coldDevelopment of the polio vaccineDiscovery of the AmericasHow did Rebecca Skloot become involved with the Lacks family?Through a family friendAs a journalist researching the storyShe is a distant relativeBy accidentWhat ethical issues does the book highlight?The importance of wearing lab coatsConsent and compensation in medical researchProper labeling of specimensKeeping a clean laboratory This quiz covers some fundamental aspects of Henrietta Lacks story and the significance of HeLa cells, aiming to test comprehension of the books key points and themes. Identify the literary devices used in the following paragraph from The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks: Henriettas cells have traveled to the moon, helped with the development of the polio vaccine, and have become a cornerstone of modern medicine. Yet, the woman behind these cells remained a mystery, her story buried under the weight of scientific achievement. It was as if Henrietta herself had become as immortal as her cells, living through the countless experiments and breakthroughs they enabled, yet her family lived in the shadows, unaware of the legacy she had left behind. Metaphor Henrietta herself had become as immortal as her cells compares Henriettas legacy to the perpetual life of her cells, emphasizing the impact of her contribution to science. Irony Despite the global journey and significant contributions of Henriettas cells, her family remains in the dark, illustrating the ironic disconnect between her scientific legacy and personal acknowledgment. Imagery Her story buried under the weight of scientific achievement evokes a visual of Henriettas personal narrative being overshadowed by the massive accomplishments her cells facilitated. Personification The cells are described as having traveled and helped, attributing human actions to them, which highlights their significant role in scientific advancements. This exercise helps to understand how literary devices enhance the narrative, adding depth and multiple layers of meaning to the text. Number one New York Times best seller.Now a major motion picture from HBO starring Oprah Winfrey and Rose Byrne.One of the most influential (CNN), defining (Lit Hub), and best (The Philadelphia Inquirer) books of the decade.One of essences 50 most impactful Black books of the past 50 years.Named one of the best books of the year by The New York Times Book Review, Entertainment Weekly, O: The Oprah Magazine, NPR, Financial Times, New York, Independent (UK), Times (UK), Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, Globe, and Mail.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 60 years. HeLa cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the atom bombs 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.Henriettas family did not learn of her immortality until more than 20 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.Over the decade it took to uncover this story, Rebecca became enmeshed in the lives of the Lacks family - especially Henriettas daughter Deborah. Deborah was consumed with questions: Had scientists cloned her mother? Had they killed her to harvest her cells? And if her mother was so important to medicine, why couldnt her children afford health insurance? 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. Estimated read time: 9 min read"The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" by Rebecca Skloot is a compelling non-fiction book that delves into the life of Henrietta Lacks, a poor African American woman whose cells were taken without her knowledge in 1951 and became one of the most important tools in medicine, leading to numerous scientific breakthroughs. The book not only tells the story of Henrietta and her immortal cells but also explores the ethical and moral implications of tissue and cell collection without consent. Skloot skillfully weaves together the story of Henrietta, the scientific impact of her cells, and the experiences of her family, creating a powerful narrative that raises questions about medical ethics, race, and the intersection of science and human rights.Brief SynopsisPlot Overview"The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" begins by introducing the reader to Henrietta Lacks, a young African American woman who sought medical treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore in the 1950s. Unbeknownst to her, a sample of her cancerous cells was taken during her treatment without her consent. These cells, known as HeLa cells, proved to be unique in their ability to replicate indefinitely, leading to countless scientific discoveries and medical breakthroughs. The book follows the journey of Henrietta's cells and the impact they had on scientific research, while also delving into the personal story of Henrietta and her family.SettingThe story is primarily set in Baltimore, Maryland, during the 1950s, a time marked by racial segregation and significant disparities in healthcare access for African Americans. The societal and medical contexts of this era play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of Henrietta Lacks and her family.Main CharactersThe book features several key characters, each playing a significant role in the narrative:CharacterDescriptionHenrietta LacksA young African American woman whose cancer cells were taken without her knowledge and became instrumental in numerous scientific breakthroughs.Deborah LacksHenrietta's daughter, who becomes deeply involved in uncovering the truth about her mother's cells and their impact on science. Her journey is central to the book's exploration of family, race, and medical ethics.Rebecca SklootThe author of the book, who becomes fascinated by Henrietta's story and forms a close relationship with her family as she seeks to uncover the truth about Henrietta's life and the legacy of her cells. Skloot's role is integral in bridging the gap between science and personal history.Summary of Different Story Points Over ChaptersPrologue - The Woman in the PhotographThe book opens with the author's encounter with Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's daughter, and introduces the reader to the mystery surrounding Henrietta's cells and the impact they had on medical research. The prologue sets the stage for the exploration of Henrietta's life, her cells, and the ethical questions raised by their use.Chapter 1 - The ExamThe narrative delves into Henrietta's visit to Johns Hopkins Hospital and the circumstances leading to the collection of her cells without her consent. The chapter provides insight into the racial dynamics and medical practices of the 1950s.Chapter 2 - CloverThe focus shifts to Henrietta's early life, her family, and the challenges she faced, shedding light on her personal history and the circumstances that led her to seek medical treatment.Chapter 3 - DiagnosisHenrietta receives her diagnosis of cervical cancer, and the narrative explores the impact of the disease on her and her family. The chapter delves into the medical procedures and treatments available to Henrietta at the time.Chapter 4 - The Birth of HeLaThe reader learns about the unique properties of Henrietta's cells and their remarkable ability to multiply, leading to the birth of the HeLa cell line. The scientific significance of HeLa cells is established, setting the stage for their widespread use in research.The book delves into the experiences of Henrietta's family following her death, exploring their grief and the challenges they faced. The chapter also addresses the broader societal issues affecting African American communities.Chapter 6 - "Lady's on the Phone"Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's daughter, emerges as a central figure as the narrative follows her quest to learn about her mother's life and the use of her cells in scientific research. The chapter introduces the reader to the personal motivations driving Deborah's search for answers.Chapter 7 - The Death and Life of Cell CultureThe scientific community's growing interest in HeLa cells and their widespread distribution for research purposes is detailed. The chapter examines the ethical implications of using cells without the donor's knowledge or consent.Chapter 8 - "Spending Eternity in the Same Place"The book delves into the complexities of informed consent and the ethical considerations surrounding tissue and cell collection. The narrative also explores the legal and moral questions raised by the commercialization of cells and tissues for research.Chapter 9 - Turner StationThe focus shifts to the community of Turner Station, where Henrietta Lacks lived, and the impact of her story on the local residents. The chapter provides a glimpse into the enduring legacy of Henrietta's cells and the profound effect on those connected to her.Chapter 10 - "The Most Critical Time on Earth"The narrative delves into the scientific advancements facilitated by HeLa cells, shaping medical research and contributing to breakthroughs in areas such as virology and genetics. The chapter highlights the transformative impact of Henrietta's cells on scientific knowledge.Chapter 11 - "The Devil of Pain Itself"The book continues to explore the experiences of Henrietta's family, particularly the health challenges they faced. The chapter also addresses the disparities in healthcare access and treatment for African American communities.Chapter 12 - The HeLa FactoryThe proliferation of HeLa cells in laboratories and the challenges of maintaining their integrity for research purposes are detailed. The chapter delves into the practical and ethical dilemmas associated with the widespread use of HeLa cells.Chapter 13 - The Secret of ImmortalityThe narrative delves into the scientific pursuit of immortality and the unique properties of HeLa cells that have made them invaluable in medical research. The chapter also addresses the ethical considerations surrounding the use of immortalized cells.Chapter 14 - "It's Alive"The book explores the impact of HeLa cells on the field of cell biology, leading to numerous scientific discoveries and advancements. The chapter highlights the transformative role of HeLa cells in shaping medical knowledge and technology.Chapter 15 - "Night Doctors"The narrative delves into the history of medical experimentation on African Americans and the experiences of Henrietta's family with the healthcare system. The chapter sheds light on the systemic injustices and exploitation faced by African American patients.Chapter 16 - "A Poor Black Woman"The book delves into the personal and societal implications of Henrietta's story, addressing issues of race, class, and medical ethics. The chapter explores the enduring impact of Henrietta's cells and the challenges faced by her family.Main EventsThe collection of Henrietta Lacks' cancer cells without her consent at Johns Hopkins Hospital.The discovery of the unique properties of Henrietta's cells, leading to the birth of the HeLa cell line.The widespread distribution and use of HeLa cells in scientific research, leading to numerous medical breakthroughs.Deborah Lacks' quest to uncover the truth about her mother's cells and their impact on science.The ethical and moral implications of tissue and cell collection without consent and the commercialization of cells for research.Themes and InsightsThe book raises profound questions about medical ethics, informed consent, and the rights of tissue and cell donors. It highlights the ethical complexities surrounding tissue collection, commercialization, and the use of cells in research without the donor's knowledge or consent.Race and Healthcare DisparitiesThe narrative sheds light on the systemic racial injustices and healthcare disparities faced by African American communities, particularly during the 1950s. It addresses the historical exploitation of African American patients in medical research and the enduring impact on marginalized communities.Family, Legacy, and Personal HistoryThe story explores the impact of Henrietta's cells on her family, addressing themes of grief, resilience, and the enduring legacy of her life. It delves into the personal experiences of Henrietta's descendants and their quest to uncover the truth about her life and the significance of her cells.Scientific Advancements and ImpactThe book highlights the transformative impact of HeLa cells on scientific research, leading to breakthroughs in areas such as virology, genetics, and cell biology. It explores the profound influence of Henrietta's cells on medical knowledge and technology.Reader's Takeaway"The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" offers a thought-provoking exploration of medical ethics, race, and the intersection of scientific advancement and personal history. Readers will gain a deeper understanding of the ethical complexities surrounding tissue and cell collection, the enduring impact of Henrietta's cells on medical research, and the experiences of her family. The book prompts reflection on issues of informed consent, healthcare disparities, and the far-reaching implications of scientific discovery on individuals and communities.ConclusionRebecca Skloot's "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" is a poignant and insightful narrative that illuminates the life of Henrietta Lacks, the impact of her immortal cells on science, and the ethical questions raised by their use. The book weaves together personal history, scientific discovery, and ethical considerations, offering a compelling exploration of medical ethics, race, and the enduring legacy of Henrietta's cells. It prompts readers to contemplate the intersection of science and human rights, the complexities of informed consent, and the far-reaching implications of medical research on individuals and communities.Jump to ratings and reviewsThe Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is a fascinating mix of memoir and science, telling the story of how one womans cells have saved countless lives. Now an HBO film starring Oprah Winfrey & Rose Byrne.No dead woman has done more for the living . . . A fascinating, harrowing, necessary book. Hilary Mantel, GuardianHer 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 Henriettas family did not learn of her immortality until more than twenty years after her death, with devastating consequences . . .Rebecca Skloots fascinating account is the story of the life, and afterlife, of one woman who changed the medical world forever. 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.GenresNonfictionScienceBook ClubHistoryBiographyAudiobookMedicine 20923 people are currently reading706695 people want to readRebecca Skloot is an award winning science writer whose work has appeared in The New York Times Magazine; O, The Oprah Magazine; Discover; and many other publications. She specializes in narrative science writing and has explored a wide range of topics, including goldfish surgery, tissue ownership rights, race and medicine, food politics, and packs of wild dogs in Manhattan. She has worked as a correspondent for WNYCs Radiolab and PBSs Nova ScienceNOW. She and her father, Floyd Skloot, are co-editors of The Best American Science Writing 2011. You can read a selection of Rebecca Skloot's magazine writing on the Articles page of this site. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Skloot's debut book, took more than a decade to research and write, and instantly became a New York Times best-seller. She has been featured on numerous television shows, including CBS Sunday Morning, The Colbert Report, Fox Business News, and others, and was named One of Five Surprising Leaders of 2010 by the Washington Post. The Immortal Life was chosen as a best book of 2010 by more than 60 media outlets, including Entertainment Weekly, USA Today, O the Oprah Magazine, Los Angeles Times, National Public Radio, People Magazine, New York Times, and U.S. News and World Report; it was named The Best Book of 2010 by Amazon.com and a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Pick. It has won numerous awards, including the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Nonfiction, the Wellcome Trust Book Prize, and two Goodreads Choice Awards for Best Nonfiction Book of the Year and Best Debut Author of the year. It has received widespread critical acclaim, with reviews appearing in The New Yorker, Washington Post, Science, and many others. Dwight Garner of the New York Times said, "I put down Rebecca Skloot's first book, "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," more than once. Ten times, probably. Once to poke the fire. Once to silence a pinging BlackBerry. And eight times to chase my wife and assorted visitors around the house, to tell them I was holding one of the most graceful and moving nonfiction books I've read in a very long time It has brains and pacing and nerve and heart. See the press page of this site for more reactions to the book.Share your story and join the conversation on the HeLa Forum. Watch video testimonials at Readers Talk. Displaying 1 - 30 of 43,148 reviewsDecember 4, 2013The doorbell rang the other day and when I answered it, there was a very slick guy in a nice suit standing there and a limousine parked at the curb. He started shaking my hand and wormed his way into the house.Mr. Kemper, Im John Doe with Dee-Bag Industries Incorporated. I need you to sign some paperwork and take a ride with me. Dont worry, Ill have you home in a day or two, he said. Then he pulled a document out of his briefcase, set it on the coffee table and pushed a pen in my hand. Wait a second. What the hell is this all about? I said as I tried to pick up the paper to read it, but Doe kept trying to force my hand with the pen down on it so I couldnt see what it said.Oh, thats just legal mumbo-jumbo. Youd rather try and read your mortgage agreement than this old thing. Just put your name down and lets be on our way, shall we? he said.There was a brief scuffle, but I managed to distract him by messing up his carefully gelled hair. As he shrieked and ran around looking for a mirror, I finally got to read the document.This is a medical consent form. Whats going on? I demanded as I shook the paper at him. Once he had combed and smoothed his hair back into perfection, Doe sighed.Very well, Mr. Kemper. I guess Ill have to come clean. Do you remember when you had your appendix out when you were in grade school?Sure. That gave me one of my better scars, but that was like 30 years ago. Why are you here now? I asked.Youre probably not aware of this, but your appendix was used in a research project by DBII, Doe said.Really? I assumed it just got incinerated or used in the hospital cafeterias meatloaf special. Why would anyone want to study my rotten appendix?Oh, all kinds of research is done on tissue gathered during medical procedures. Most people dont know that, but its very common, Doe said.OK, but why are you here now?Well, your appendix turned out to be very special. It was secreting some kind of pus that no one had seen before. After many tests, it turned out to be a new chemical compound with commercial applications. So a patent was filed based on that compound and turned into a consumer product, Doe admitted.That sounds disgusting. What was it used in? Because I want to make sure to never buy it, I said.Its the basis for the adhesive on Post-It Notes, Doe said.Are you freaking kidding me? Post-It Notes are based on my old appendix?Im absolutely serious, Mr. Kemper. Now we at DBII need your help. Unfortunately for us, you havent had anything removed lately. So I have to get your consent if were going to do further studies, Doe said.But you already got my goo-seeping appendix. I dont have another one, I said. True, but sales have been down for Post-It Notes lately. So after the marketing and research boys talked it over for a while, they thought we should bring you in for a full body scan. Maybe youve got a spleen giving out or something else that we could pull out and see if we could use it, Doe said.This is pretty damn disturbing, I said.Why? Youre an organ donor, right? Same thing, Doe said.I dont consider someone lucking into an organ if the Chiefs win a play-off game and I have a goddamn heart attack the same thing as companies making money off tissue I had removed decades ago and didnt know anything about, I said.Fortunately, the American government and legal system disagree. So how about it, Mr. Kemper? Will you come with me? Doe asked.I dunno. Whats my end of this? You already owe me a fat check for the Post-Its.Oh, no. You wont get any money from the Post-Its, or if any future discoveries from your tissues lead to more gains. Doe said.Thats complete bullshit!Again, the legal system disagrees with you. But this is for science, Mr. Kemper. You dont want to hold up medical scientific research that could save lives, do you?Its for Post-It Notes!Maybe, but who is to say that the cure for some terrible disease isn't lurking somewhere in your genes? Could you live with yourself if you prevented crucial medical research just because you were ticked off that you didnt get any money for your appendix? Remember that its not like you could have NOT had your appendix removed. At least, not if you wanted to keep living. And I highly doubt that you would have had the resources to have it studied and discovered the adhesive for yourself even if you would have taken it home with you in a jar after it was removed. Were the ones who spent all that money to get some good out of a piece of disgusting gunk that tried to kill you. So shouldnt we be compensated? What are you? Some kind of damn dirty hippie liberal socialist? Doe said in disgustYoure a hell of a corporate lackey, Doe, I said.Thank you.Fine. Ill do it, I said as I signed the form. But I want some free Post-It Notes.No deal. Steal them from work like everyone else, Doe said.******Obviously, Im a big fat liar and none of this happened, but I really did have my appendix out as a kid. Plus, my tonsils got yanked and Ive had my fair share of blood taken over the years. What this book taught me is that its highly likely that some of my scraps are sitting in frozen jars in labs somewhere. Yours, too. If any of us have anything unique in our tissues that may be valuable for medical research, its possible that theyd be worth a fortune, but wed never see a dime of it.Henrietta Lacks couldnt be considered lucky by any stretch of the imagination. A black woman who grew up poor on a tobacco farm, she married her cousin and moved to the Baltimore area. Her husband apparently liked to step out on her and Henrietta ended up with STDs, and one of her children was born mentally handicapped and had to be institutionalized. In 1951, Henrietta was diagnosed with cervical cancer by doctors at Johns Hopkins. During her biopsy, cell samples were taken and given to a researcher who had been working on the problem of trying to grow human cells. Henriettas cancer spread wildly, and she was dead within a year. But her cells turned out to be an incredible discovery because they continued growing at a very fast rate. The doctor at Johns Hopkins started sharing his find for no compensation, and this coincided with a large need for cell samples due to testing of the polio vaccine. The HeLa cells would be crucial for confirming that the vaccine worked and soon companies were created to grow and ship them to researchers around the world. Since then, Henriettas cells have been sent into outer space and subjected to nuclear tests and cited in over 60,000 medical research papersUnfortunately, no one ever asked Henriettas permission and her family knew nothing about the important role her cells played in medicine for decades. Poor and with little formal education, Henriettas children were confused by what was actually done to their mother and upset when they learned that her tissue was part of a multi-million dollar industry that theyve received no compensation from..Rebecca Skloot has written a fascinating book that clearly outlines why Henriettas cells were so important, why she went unrecognized for decades, the pain its caused her family, and the way that new medical discoveries over the last sixty years have opened a potential Pandoras Box of legal and ethical issues regarding tissue collection, research, patents and money. This book brings up a lot of issues that were probably all going to be dealing with in the future. Also posted at Kemper's Book Blog.blinded-me-with-science medical non-fiction Petra in Hawaii doing hulaJune 25, 2023This is an all-gold ten-star read!It's actually two stories, the story of the HeLa cells and the story of the Lacks family told by a journalist who writes the first story objectively and the second, in which she is involved, subjectively. The contrast between the poor Lacks family who cannot afford their medical bills and the research establishment who have made millions, maybe billions from these cells is ironic and tragic. It has been established by other law cases that if the family had gone for restitution they would not have got it, but that's a moot point as they couldn't afford a lawyer in any case. I have seen some bad reviews about this book. People who think that the story of the Lacks - poor rural African-Americans who never made it 'up' from slavery and whose lifestyle of decent working class folk that also involves incest, adultery, disease and crime, they just dismiss with 'heard it all before' and 'my family despite all obstacles succeeded so what is wrong with the Lacks?' I wonder if these people who not only totally can't see the wonderful writing that brings these people to life and who so lack in compassion themselves are the sort of people who oppose health care for the masses? As an extremely wealthy American tourist once put it to me, he had earned good health care by his hard work and success in life, it was one of the perks, why waste good money on, say, a a triple-bypass on someone who hasn't even succeeded enough to afford health insurance? That they were a drain on society, non-contributors and not the way America needed to go to move forward.I don't think you can rate people by what they have achieved materially. Success depends a great deal on opportunity and many don't have that. Henrietta Lacks didn't have it and her children didn't have it, not even her grandchildren made much of a way for themselves, but the next generation, the great grandchildren - ah now they are going in for Masters degrees and maybe their children will be major contributors. The author intends to recompense the family by setting up a scholarship for at least one of them. All of us came originally from poverty and to put down those that are still mired in the quicksand of never having enough spare cash to finance an education is cruel, uncompassionate and hardly looking to the future.H

few days. HeLa cells though, stayed alive in the petri dish, and proved to be virtually unstoppable, growing faster and stronger than any other cells known.These HeLa cells were used to develop the polio vaccine, chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilisation and a host of other medical treatments. They were sent on the first space missions to see what would happen to human cells in zero gravity. It is fair to say that they have helped with some of the most important advances in medicine. But there is a terrible irony and injustice in this. The people to benefit from this were largely white people. Henrietta Lacks's family and descendants suffered appalling poverty. Working from dawn to dusk in poisonous tobacco fields was the norm as soon as the children were able to stand. Moving from Virginia's tobacco production to Bethlehem Steel, a boiler manufacturer in South Boston, was little better, as they were then exposed to asbestos and coal. The families had intermingled for generations. Henrietta and Day, her husband, were first cousins, and this was by no means unusual. So the predisposition to illness was both hereditary and environmental. But access to medical help was virtually nil. Most hospitals accepted only whites, or grudgingly admitted so-called "colored" people to a separate area, which was far less well funded and staffed. The Lacks family had to travel a long way in order to be treated, and then were not allowed the privilege of proper explanations as to the treatment given - or the tissue samples extracted.At this time unusual cells were taken routinely by doctors wanting to make their own investigations into cancer (which at that time was thought to be a virus) and many other conditions. No permission was sought; none was needed. The Hippocratic oath doctors set such store by dates from the 4th Century BC, and makes no mention of it; neither did the law of the time require it. It was not until 1947, that the subject was raised. Nazi doctors had performed many ethically unsound operations and experiments on live Jews, and during the trials after the war the Nuremberg Code - a 10 point code of ethics - was set up. This states that, "The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential." Even then it was advice, not law. Rebecca Skloot says that Howard Jones, the doctor who had originally diagnosed Henrietta Lacks' cancer, said, "Hopkins, with its large indigent black population, had no dearth of clinical material." It was clearly a racial norm of the time. In fact to be fair, the white doctors had no real conception that what they were doing had an ethical side. George Gey and his assistants were responsible for isolating the genetic material in Henrietta's cells - an astonishing feat. Gey happily shared the cells with any scientists who asked. The issue of payment was never raised, but the HeLa cells fast became a commodity, and the Lacks's family, who were never consulted about anything, mistakenly assumed until very recently that Gey must have made a fortune out of them. As Henrietta's daughter Deborah said, "Them white folks getting rich of our mother while we got nothin." Skloot carefully chronicles some of the most shocking medical stories from these times. The reader infers from her examples that testing on the impoverished and disadvantaged was almost routine. One notorious study was into syphilis and apparently went on for 40 years. It was called the "Tuskegee study", and involved thousands of males at varying stages of the disease. At the time it was known that they could be cured by penicillin, but they were not given this treatment, in order that doctors could study the progress of the disease. In this case they were volunteers, but were encouraged by the offer of free travel to the hospital, a free meal when they got there, and the promise of $50 for their families after they died, for funeral expenses. There are many such poignant examples. The author also says that in 1954 thousands of chronically ill elderly people, convicts and even some children, were injected by a Dr. Chester Southam with HeLa cells, basically just to see what would happen. Of course many of them went on to develop cancer. One man who had Hela cells injected in his arm produced small tumours there within days. But the patients were never informed of this, and if they did happen to ask were told they were being "tested for immunity". (We are told that Southam was prosecuted for this much later in 1966.) It was not until 1957 that there was any mention in law of "informed consent." Confidentially and privacy violation issues came far later.After her death, four of Henrietta Lacks's children, Lawrence, Deborah, Sonny and Joe, were put in the charge of Ethel, a friend of the family who had been very envious of Henrietta. It appears that she was incredibly cruel to the children, hardly ever feeding them until late, after a day's work, when they would be given a meagre crust. She would also drag the youngest one, Joe, out of bed at will, and beat him unmercifully. Joe was only 4 months old when his mother died and grew up to have severe behavioural problems. In fact later on on life, all these children grew to have not only health problems (including all being almost deaf) but a myriad of social problems too - being involved in burglary, assault and drugs - and spent a lot of their lives in prison.One of Henrietta's five children had been put in "Crownsville Hospital for the Negro Insane" when she was still tiny, because Henrietta was too ill to care for her any more. The story of this child, which is gradually told through Skloot's text as more of it is revealed, is heart-breaking. It is not clear why Elsie was so slow, but her mental retardation is now thought to be partly due to syphilis, and partly due to being born on the home-house stone floor - which was routine for such families at the time - and banging her head during birth. It was not known what had subsequently happened to Elsie until Skloot's research, but then some records were discovered. A photograph of Elsie shows a miserable child apparently in pain in a distorted position. Apparently brain scans then necessitated draining the surrounding brain fluid. Never mind that the patient might then suffer violent headaches, fits and vomiting for 2-3 months until the fluid reformed; it gave a better picture. Many people had been sent to this institution because of "idiocy" or epilepsy; the assumption now is that that they were incarcerated to get them out of the way, and that tests like this, often for research, were routine. Figures from 1955, when Elsie died, showed that at that time the hospital had 2700 patients, which was 800 over the maximum capacity. The ratio of doctors to patients was 1 doctor for 225 patients.Add into this the appalling inhumanity of history where white people used black people for their own ends, and the fears of Henrietta's family and community become inevitable. There had been stories for generations of white-coated doctors coming at dead of night and experimenting on black people. This became confused - or perhaps vindicated - by the Ku Klux Klan. Stories of voodoo, charismatic religious experiences, dire poverty, lack of basic education (one of Henrietta's brothers was more fortunate in that he had 4 years' schooling in total) untreated health problems and the prevailing 1950's attitudes of never questioning the doctor, all fed into the mix resulting in ignorance and occasional hysteria.Much of the first part of this book includes descriptions of scientific research and discoveries; both the theory and practise of how genes were isolated. Alternating with this is the background to the racial tensions, and the history of Henrietta Lacks' ancestry and family. Rebecca Skloot, a science writer, had been fascinated by the potential story since school days, when she first heard of HeLa cells, but nobody seemed to know anything about them. She started this book in her 20's, and spent a decade researching it, financed by credit cards and student loans. As a white woman she was treated with gross suspicion by all Henrietta Lacks's family. Eventually she formed a good relationship with Deborah, but it took a year before Deborah would even speak to her, and Deborah's brothers were very resistant. Several of them were pastors, as was James Pullam, her husband. They believed the Bible literally and had many fears about how Henrietta's cells were used. Deborah herself could not understand how they were immortal. Could her mother's cells feel pain when they were exploded, or infected? Would they develop into half-human half-chicken freaks when they were split and combined with chicken cells? Were there millions of clones all looking like her mother wandering around London? The media worldwide had played its part in adding to these fears, which had been spawned by a genuine ignorance.The interviews with Henrietta's family, and the progress and discoveries Skloot made accompanied by Deborah in the second part of the book, do make the reader uneasy. Indeed parts of these passages read like a trashy novel. Skloot says she wanted to report the conversation verbatim, so the vernacular is reported intact. Fair enough. But there is a lot of, "Deborah shouted" or, "Lawrence yelled". Of course they did! All of Henrietta's children had severe health problems, probably due to a variety of factors; their environment, upbringing and genetic inheritance. They were all very hard of hearing, so yes, they would shout when amongst themselves. Add to this Skloot's tendency to describe the attributes and appearance of a family member as "beautiful hazel-nut brown skin" or "twinkling eyes" and there is a whiff of condescension which does not sit well. Does it add anything to this account? Would a description of the author as having "raven-black hair and full glossy lips" help? Of course not. The author may feel she is being complimentary; she is not. She is being patronising. But it is difficult to know how else the total incomprehension and ignorance of how a largely white society operated could have been conveyed, other than by this verbatim reportage, even though at worst it comes across as extremely crass, and at best gently humorous.It would be convenient to imagine that these appalling cases were a thing of the past. But the book continues detailing injustices until the date of its publication in 2010. Henrietta's son, Sonny had a quintuple bypass in 2003. Skloot reports, "The last thing he remembered before falling unconscious under the anesthesia was a doctor standing over him saying his mother's cells were one of the most important things that had ever happened in medicine." So far, so good. There was recognition. But Skloot then delivers the final shot, "Sonny woke up more than $125,500 in debt because he didn't have health insurance to cover the surgery." As Lawrence (Henrietta's eldest son) says elsewhere, "It's not fair! She's the most important person in the world and her family [are] living in poverty. If our mother [is] so important to science, why can't we get health insurance?"Henrietta's original cancer had in fact been misdiagnosed. It was discovered years later that because she had syphilis, she had the genital warts HPV virus, which does actually invade the DNA. There is an intriguing section on this, as well as the "HeLa bomb", where one doctor painstakingly proved to the whole of the scientific community that a lot of their research had been flawed, as HeLa cells were contaminating many of the other cells they had been working with and drawing conclusions from. They were so virulent that they could travel on the smallest particle of dust in the atmosphere, and because Gey had given them so generously, there was no real record of where they had all ended up.Deborah herself always lived in fear of inheriting her mother's cancer. Because of this she readily submitted to tests. Victor McKusick took blood samples, which Deborah believed were for "cancer tests." In fact though, Skloot claims, they were for his own research. This is another example of chronic misunderstanding. He knew of the family's mental anguish and the unfair treatment they had had. He thought she understood why he wanted the blood. He gave her an autographed copy of his book - a technical manual on Genetics. Of this, Deborah commented wryly, "It would have been nice if he'd told me what the damn thing said too." And again, "I would like some health insurance so I don't got to pay all that money every month for drugs my mother cells probably helped to make."In 2001, Skloot tells us, Christoph Lengauer, now the Head of Oncology in one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world, said of Henrietta, "Her cells are how it all started." And to Deborah, "Once there is a cure for cancer, it's definitely largely because of your mother's cells."In 2005 the US government issued gene patents relating to the use of 20% of known human genes, including Alzheimer's, asthma, colon cancer and breast cancer. The injustices however, continue. Pharmaceutical companies, scientists and universities now control what research is done, and the costs of the resulting tests and therapies. An example of how this continues to impede scientific development according to the author is that of the company Myriad Genetics, who hold the patent on BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes. (These are the genes which are responsible for most hereditary breast cancers.) The company had arbitrarily set a charge of $3000 to have this test, amid furore amongst scientists. They had licensed the use of the test. Anyone who ignored it received a threat of litigation. Eventually in 2009 they were sued by the American Civil Liberties Union, representing a huge number of people including 150,000 scientists for inhibiting research. The commercialisation of human biological materials has now become big business.There seems to have been some attempts at restitution since this book was published, the most recent being in August 2013. There was an agreement between the family and The National Institutes of Health to give the family some control over the access to the cells' DNA code, and a promise of acknowledgement on scientific papers. The committee set to oversee this arrangement will have 6 members, 2 of whom will be members of the family. The wheels have been set in motion.All in all this is an important and startlingly original book by a dedicated and compassionate author. It speaks to every one of us, regardless of our colour, nationality or class. Skloot admitted that it took a long time to decide the structure of the book, in order to include all the important aspects that she wished to. There are three sections: "Life", "Death" and "Immortality", plus an "Afterword". The main thrust throughout is clearly the enduring injustice the Lacks family suffered. So perhaps the final words should be Joe's, or (as he changed his name when he converted to Islam in prison), Zakariyya's: "I believe what them doctors did was wrong. They lied to us for 25 years, kept them cells from us, then they gonna say them things DONATED by our mother. Them cells was stolen! Those fools come take blood from us sayin they need to run tests and not tell us that all these years they done profitized off of her. You don't lie and clone behind their backs. That's wrong - it's one of the most violating parts of this whole thing.Then doctors say her cells [are] so important and did all this and that to help people. But it didn't do no good for her, and it don't do no good for us. If me and my sister need something, we can't even go and see a doctor cause we can't afford it."It's too late for some of Henrietta's family. For how many others will it also be too late?auto-and-biography kindle non-fiction August 9, 2018This is a very powerful and informative story. Also, with the history of personal freedoms, civil rights, and right to privacy/requiring consent, this is a very important books. I am not sure the details about the science involved in the story will appeal to all. Just the same as how those who are here for the science may be disinterested in the background stories of the people involved. But, if you think you will like one of the other, I dont think the one you dont care for will be distracting.With that in mind, I will continue with the statement that it really is two books: the science and the people. First, the background of cell and tissue research in the last 100 years is intriguing and to hear about all of the advances and why Henretta Lacks was key to them is fascinating. Second, the background of not only the Lacks family, but also others who have had their tissues/cells used for research without permission, gives a lot of food for thought. Almost every medical advancement, and many scientific advancements, in the past 60 years are because of Henrietta Lacks. But, questions about the consent she gave, what she understood about her cells being used, and how much the family has benefited are all questioned and discussed. It really hits hard to think that you may have no control over parts of you once they are no longer part of your body. Also, the fiscal and research ramifications of giving people more rights over their body tissue/cells really creates a huge Catch-22. As I had surgery earlier this year that involved some tissue being removed for analysis, it started to make me wonder what I signed on all those forms and if my cells might still be out there being used for research.The only part of the book that kind of dragged for me was the time that the author spent with the family late in the book. After listening to an interview with the author it was surprising to hear that this part of the book may have been her original focus (how the family has dealt with the revelations surrounding the use of their mothers cells), but to me it kind of dragged and got repetitive. I dont think it is bad and others may find it interesting, it just was what brought down my interest in the story a little bit.If you like science-based stories, medical-based stories, civil/personal rights history, and/or just love a decent non-fiction, I think this book is very worth checking out.2018 biography digital September 5, 2010When I was a graduate student in the field of Ethics, one of my favorite pedagogical strategies, as both a teacher and a student, was the case study. A good case study can make an abstract ethical issue more concrete. A really good case study can turn a deeply contentious issue into an opportunity for thoughtfulness and compassion; right and wrong (to the extent that those concepts even belong in the study of ethics) are nuanced by descriptions of circumstances or values or human need that can make it easier to see and hear and believe the ones on the other side(s) of an issue. Often the case studies are hypothetical, or descriptions of actual cases pared to "just the facts, ma'am," without all the possible extenuating circumstances that can shape difficult decisions. For some students, this causes great angst. How could they be asked to make a judgment, especially one that might involve life or death, without knowing all the details? And of course, at the end of the lesson, everyone wants to know what really happened, how things turned out "in real life." On those rare occasions when we actually do know something of the outcome, it is clear that knowing what "really" happened almost never makes the decision easier, clearer, or less agonizing. And that is what makes The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks so deeply compelling and challenging. It is the rare story of the outcome of a seemingly inconsequential decision by a doctor and a researcher in 1951, one that few at that time would have ever seen as an ethical decision, let alone an unethical one. A researcher studying cell cultures needs samples; a doctor treating a woman with aggressive cervical cancer scrapes a few extra cells of that cancer into a Petri dish for the researcher. The missing cells had no bearing whatsoever on the outcome of the woman's disease, so no harm done. A few weeks later the woman is dead, but her cancer cells are living in the lab. The bare bones ethical issue at stake--whether it is ethically warranted to take a patient's tissues without consent and subsequently use them for scientific and medical research--is even now not a particularly contentious one...yet. Legally, the case law is settled: tissue removed in the course of medical treatment or testing no longer belongs to the patient. It is, in essence, refuse, and one woman's trash is another man's treasure. Ethically, almost all the professional guidelines encourage researchers to obtain consent, but they have no teeth (and most were non-existent in 1951 anyway). In reality, the vast majority of the tissue taken from patients is of limited use. But there are those rare times when a single person's cells have the potential to break open the worlds of science and medicine, to the benefit of millions--and the enrichment of a very few. Such was the case with the cells of cervical cancer taken from Henrietta Lacks at Johns Hopkins University hospital. HeLa cells grew in the lab of George Gey. And grew. And grew, unlike any cell before it. Next, they were carried to a different laboratory at the University of Pittsburgh, where Jonas Salk used them to successfully test his polio vaccine, and thus the cancer that had killed Henrietta Lacks directly led to the healing of millions worldwide. Soon HeLa cells would be in almost every major research laboratory in the world. They traveled to Asia to help find a cure for hemorrhagic fever and into space to study the effects of zero gravity on human cells. Even today, almost 60 years after Henrietta's death, HeLa cells are some of the most widely used by the scientific community. With such immeasurable benefits as these, who could possibly doubt the wisdom of Henrietta's doctor to take a tiny bit of tissue? But the "real" story is much more complicated. Henrietta Lacks was uneducated, poor and black. Her cancer was treated in the "colored" ward of Johns Hopkins. Her death left five children without their mother, to be raised by an abusive cousin. Should any of that matter in weighing the morality of taking tissue from a patient without her consent, especially in light of the benefits? God knows our country's history of medical experimentation on the poor and minority populations is not pretty. Ironically, one of the laboratories researching with HeLa cells in the 1950s was the one at the Tuskegee Institute--at the very same time that the infamous syphilis studies were taking place. In light of that history, Henrietta's race and socioeconomic status can't help but be relevant factors in her particular case. But her children's status? What bearing does that have? According to author Rebecca Skloot, in ethical discussions of the use of human tissue, "[t]here are, essentially, two issues to deal with: consent and money." Both become issues for Henrietta's children. The family didn't learn until 1973 that their mother's cells had been taken, or that they'd played such a vital role in the development of scientific knowledge. They spent the next 30 years trying to learn more about their mother's cells. As they learned of the money made by the pharmaceutical companies and other companies as a direct result of HeLa cells, they inevitably asked questions about what share, if any, they were entitled to. As Henrietta's eldest son put it, "If our mother so important to science, why can't we get health insurance?" But even more than financial compensation, the family wants recognition--and respect--for their mother. They want the woman behind her contributions acknowledged for who she is--a black woman, a mother, a person with name longer than four letters. And they want to know the mother they never knew, to find out the facts of her death. In the lab at Johns Hopkins, looking through a microscope at her mother's cells for the first time, daughter Deborah sums it up: "John Hopkin [sic] is a school for learning, and that's important. But this is my mother. Nobody seem to get that." Would a fully informed Henrietta Lacks have made the decision to give her tissue to George Gey if asked? Would her decision either way have had any affect whatsoever on her children's future lives? We'll never know, of course. But reading the story behind the case study makes these questions far more potent than any ethics textbook can. And as science now unravels the strains of our DNA--thanks in no small part to HeLa--these are no longer inconsequential questions for any of us. Perhaps we, too, like the doctors and scientists who have long studied HeLa, can learn from the case study of Henrietta Lacks. February 26, 2022The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca SklootThe Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks (2010) is a non-fiction book by American author Rebecca Skloot. 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 cellstaken without her knowledgebecame one of the most important tools in medicine. The first immortal human cells grown in culture, they are still alive today, though she has been dead in 1951. If you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, theyd weigh more than 50 million metric tonsas much as a hundred Empire State Buildings. HeLa cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the atom bombs 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. : 2014: : () : 1390 426 9789649219165 : 1920 1951 - - - - 21 - - 1951 : - : 15/02/1400 06/12/1400 . May 11, 2025 ... . ! ... .February 10, 2017There are some books that I finish and am left in awe, questioning everything that I thought I knew on a subject. Or, as is the case hear, having learned so much about which I knew nothing. My jaw is still on the floor after I finished this book and I can only imagine the controversies and discussions it might provoke. A thank you goes out to three Goodreads friends who recommended that I read this book and open an avenue for discussion. Aven, Brenda, and Rae, I hope we can begin a wild and intriguing dialogue, pulling others into the mix as things gain momentum.Who was Henrietta Lacks? What are HeLa cells? These are two of the foundational questions that Rebecca Skloot sought to answer in this poignant biographical piece. While I have tackled a number of biographies in my time as a reader, Skloot offered a unique approach to the genre in publication. Henrietta Lacks grew up in rural Virginia, picking tobacco and made ends meet as best she could. After marrying, she had a brood of children, including two of note, Elsie and Deborah, whose significance becomes apparent as the reader delves deeper into the narrative. Skloot offered up a succinct, but detailed narrative of how Lacks found an unusual mass inside her and was sent from her doctor to a specialist at Johns Hopkins (yes, THAT medical centre) for treatment. The mass was malignant and Lacks was deemed to have cervical cancer. Her surgeon, following the precedent of many doctors in the early 1950s, took samples of her tumour as well as that of the healthy part of her cervix, hoping to be able to have the cells survive so they could be analysed. Past attempts by doctors and scientists failed to keep cells alive for very long, which led to the constant slicing and saving technique used by those in the medical profession, when the opportunity arose. As it turns out, Lacks' cells were not only fascinating to explore, but George Gey (Head of Tissue Culture Research at Johns Hopkins) noticed that they lasted indefinitely, as long as they were properly fed. Gey realised that he had something on his hands and tried to get approval from the Lacks family, though did so in an extremely opaque manner. After Lacks succumbed to the cancer, doctors sought to perform an autopsy, which might allow them complete access to Lacks' body. Ignorant of what was going on, Henrietta's husband agreed, thinking that this was only to ensure his children and subsequent generations would not suffer the agony that cancer brought upon Henrietta. So began the conniving and secretive nature of George Gey. He harvested these 'special cells' and named them "HeLa", a brief combination of the original patient's two names. Their phenomenal growth and sustainability led him to ship them all over the country and eventually the world, though the Lacks family had no idea this was going on. HeLa cells were studied to create a polio vaccine (Jonas Salk used them at the University of Pittsburgh), helped to better understand cellular reactions to nuclear testing, space travel, and introduction of cancer cells into an otherwise healthy body during curious and somewhat inhumane tests on Ohio inmates. During all this, Johns Hopkins remained completely aware of what was going on and the transmission of HeLa cells around the globe, though did not think to inform the Lacks family, perhaps for fear that they would halt the use of these HeLa cells. Through the use of the term 'HeLa' cells, no one was the wiser and no direct acknowledgement of the long-deceased Henrietta Lacks need be made. Skloot provided much discussion about the uses, selling, 'donating', and experimenting that took place, including segments of the scientific community in America that were knowingly in violation of the Nuremberg Rules on human experimentation, though they danced their own legal jig to get around it all. The crux of the biography lay on this conundrum, though it would only find its true impact by exploring the lives of those Henrietta Lacks left behind after her death.Skloot took the time to pepper chapters with the history of the Lacks family as they grew up and, eventually, what happened when they were made aware that the HeLa cells existed, over two decades after they were obtained and Henrietta had died. Skloot split this other biographical piece into two parts, which eventually merge into one, documenting her research trips and interviews with the family alongside the presentation of a narrative that explores the fruits of those sit-down interviews. That Skloot tried to remain somewhat neutral is apparent, though through her connection to Henrietta's youngest daughter, Deborah, there was an obvious bias that developed. Superimposing these two narratives would, hopefully, offer the reader a chance to feel a personal connection to the Lacks family and the struggles they went through. In her discussions of the Lacks family, Skloot pulled no punches and presented the raw truths of criminal activity, abuse, addiction, and poverty alongside happy gatherings and memories of Henrietta. No biographical piece would be complete if it were only window dressing and trying to paint a rosy picture of this maligned family without offering at least a little peek into their daily lives. However, it balanced out and Skloot ended up with what the reader might call a decent introduction to this run of the mill family unit. Their ire at being duped by Johns Hopkins was apparent, alongside the dichotomy that HeLa cells were so popular, yet the family remained in dire poverty in the poor areas of Baltimore.The legal ramifications of HeLa cell usage was discussed at various points in the book, though there was no firm case related to it, at least not one including the Lacks family. One person I know sought to draw parallels between the Lacks situation and that of Carrie Buck, as illustrated wonderfully in Adam Cohen's book, Imbeciles (. While the courts surely fell short in codifying ownership of cells and research done on them, the focus of Skloot's book was the social injustice by Johns Hopkins, not the ineptitude of the US Supreme Court, as Cohen showed while presenting Buck v. Bell to the curious audience. While George Gey vowed that he gave away the HeLa cell samples to anyone who wanted them, surely the chain reaction and selling of them in catalogues thereafter allowed someone to line their pockets. Skloot offers up numerous mentions from the family, usually through Deborah, that the Lacks family was not seeking to get rich off of this discovery of immortal cells. While companies were spending millions and profiting billions from the early testing of HeLa cells, no one in the family could afford to see a doctor or purchase the medicines they needed (all of which came about because of tests HeLa cells facilitated!). It is both fascinating and angering to see the system wash their hands of the guilt related to immoral collecting and culturing of these HeLa cells. Skloot did explore the slippery slope of cells and tissue as discarded waste, as well as the need for consent in testing them, something the reader ought to spend some time exploring once the biographical narrative ends. It is sure to confound and confuse even the most well-grounded reader.The latter chapters touched upon the aptly used word from the title "Immortal" as it relates to Henrietta Lacks. Be it a biography that placed a story behind the woman, a detailed discussion of how the HeLa cell came into being and how its presence is all over the medical world, or that medical advancements as we know them will allow Henrietta Lacks' being to live on for eternity, the reader can reflect on which rationale best suits them. While there is a religious undertone in the biography as it relates to this, Christianity is not inculcated into the reader's mind, as it was not when Skloot learned about these things.Do I know Henrietta Lacks any better now, after Skloot completed her work? Most definitely! Can I, a complete scientific dunce, better understand HeLa cells and the idea behind cell growth and development? Completely! Do I feel there was an injustice done to the Lacks family by Johns Hopkins in 1951 and for decades to come? Yes, I do harbour a strong resentment to the duplicitous attitude undertaken by a hospital whose founder sought to ensure those who could not receive medical care on their own be helped and protected. Is there a lingering legal argument to be made for compensatory damages or at least some fiduciary responsibility owed to the Lacks family? That is a very grey area for me, only further complicated by the legal discussions in the Afterward and the advancement of new and complicated scientific discoveries, which also bore convoluted legal arguments. I will say this... Skloot brought Henrietta Lacks to life and if that puts a face to those HeLa cells, perhaps all those who read this book will think twice about those medicines used in their bodies and the scientific breakthroughs that are attributed to many powerful companies and/or nations. Maybe then, Henrietta can live on in all of us, immortal in some form or another.Kudos, Madam Skloot for intriguing someone whose scientific background is almost nil. You brought numerous stories to life and helped me see just how powerful one woman can be, silenced by death and the ignorance of what those around her were doing.Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at: 8, 2017Overall, a four star read that should probably be required reading for both biology and American history classes. (Actually, it was a far more interesting read than that makes it sound). While I had heard a great deal of buzz on the book, I wasn't prepared for how the story evolved. The book alternates between Henrietta Lacks' personal history, that of her family, a little of medical history and Skoot's actual pursuit of the story, which helps develop the story in historical context. Skoots included a lot more science than I expected, and even with ten years in the medical field, I was horrified at times. Skoots does a decent job of maintaining a journalistic tone, but some of the things she relates are terrible, from the way Henrietta grew up to cervical cancer treatment in the 50s and 60s. These were the days before cancer treatments approached the precision medicine it is aiming for today, and the treatments resembled nothing so much as trying to cut fingernails with garden shears. Just the thought of a radioactive seed tucked in the uterus causing tissue burn was enough to give me sympathetic cramps.Part of the evil in the book is the violence her family inflicted on each other, and it's one of the truly uncomfortable areas. I think that discomfort is important, because part of where this story comes from has to do with slavery and poverty. There isn't really an ethical high ground here, and that's part of Skoot's skill in setting up the story, and part of the problem in being a white woman telling the story of a black woman. The only reason I didn't give this a five star rating is that the narrative started to fall apart at the end, leaving behind the stories of the cell line and focus more on the breakdown of Henrietta's daughter, Deborah. While I understand she is the touchstone for the story, that she is partly telling the story of the mother through the daughter, much of Henrietta and the science is sidelined.Interesting questions popped up while reading; namely, why does everyone equate Henrietta's cancer cells with her person? As an illustration, if you tell people they have a cancerous tumor, the reaction is "get rid of it." It is categorized as "other" in everyone's mind and not recognized it as an intrinsic part of the person with cancer. It is not "them." Biologically speaking, I'm not sure the book answered the question of whether of not the HeLa cells actually were genetically identical to Henrietta, or if they were mutated--altered DNA. While that might be cold comfort, it's a huge philosophical and scientific question that is the pivot point for a number of issues. Treating the cells as if they were "normal" is part of what lead the scientists into disaster as evidenced by the discovery that so many cell lines were HeLa contaminated (I don't believe that transmission mechanism was explained either, which irks me). It also could be the basis for a sophisticated legal and ethical argument.medicine non-fiction scienceJanuary 23, 2015When a poor woman dies of cervical cancer in 1951, her cancerous cells live on. But what happens when her biological material generates billions of dollars for the drug and pharmaceutical industry, leaving her dirt poor descendants in the lurch?Yeah, I know I wrote that like the teaser for one of my mysteries but the only mystery here is how people who have profited from the diseased cells that killed a woman can sleep at night while her kids and grand kids don't have two nickels to rub together.The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is really two stories. One of Henrietta Lacks and her cancer cells that lived decades beyond her years, and the other of Rebecca Skloot and the surviving members of the Lacks family.Henrietta Lacks married her cousin, contracted multiple STD's due to his philandering ways, and died of misdiagnosed cervical cancer by the time she was 30. However, the cancer that killed her survives today in the form of HeLa cells, which have been taken to the moon, exposed to every manner of radiation and illness, and all sorts of other experiments. While other people are raking in money due to the HeLa research, the surviving Lacks family doesn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, bringing me to the real meat of the book: The pharmaceutical industry is a bunch of dickbags. Imagine having something removed that generated billions of dollars of revenue for people you've never met and still needing to watch your budget so you can pay your mortage. Fair? Shit no, but that's the way it is, apparently. It also seems illogical that you can patent things you didn't create but again, that's the way the cookie crumbles.The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is an eye-opening look at someone most of us have never heard of but probably owe some sort of debt to. Also, it drags the big money pharma companies out in the sun. Sadly, they do not burst into flames like the vampires they are. Four out of five stars. I'm going to go read something happy now.February 7, 2017The gift of life is surely the greatest gift of all. So how can the story of the remarkable woman who gave that gift over and over again to millions of people have been overlooked for so long?In 1951 a poor African American woman in Maryland became an uninformed donor to medical science. Henrietta Lacks died at age 31 of cervical cancer at John Hopkins hospital in Baltimore. Then doctors discovered that tumor cells they had removed from her body earlier continued to thrive in the lab - a medical first.Before long, her cells, dubbed HeLa cells, would be used for research around the world, contributing to major advances in everything from cancer treatments to vaccines; from aging to the life cycle of mosquitoes; nuclear bomb explosions to effect of gravity on human tissue during flights to outer space. An estimated 50 million metric tons of her cells were reproduced; thousands of careers have been build, and initiated more than 60 000 scientific studies until now, but Henrietta Lacks never gave permission for that research, nor had her family.In The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot gracefully tells the story of the real woman and her descendants; the history of race-related medical research, including the role of eugenics; the struggles of the Lacks family with poverty, politics and racial issues; the phenomenal development of science based on the HeLa cells, in a language that can be understood by everyone. She combined the family's story with the changing ethics and laws around tissue collection, the irresponsible use of the family's medical information by journalists and researchers and the legislation preventing the family from benefiting from it all.COMMENTSI was gifted this book in December but never realized the impact it had internationally, neither would have on me. Until I finished reading it last night, I did not know it was an international bestseller, as well as read by so many of my GR friends! It was total surprise, since nonfiction is normally not a regular star on bestseller lists, right?The debate around the moral issue, and the experiences of the poor family were very well presented in the book, which was truly well written and objective as far as possible. For me personally, the question of how this woman, who basically saved millions of people's lives, were overlooked, is answered in the arrogance of scientists who deemed it unnecessary to respect the rights of people unable to fend for themselves.The ethical and moral dilemmas it created in America, when the family became aware of their mother's contribution to science without anyone's knowledge or consent, just enabled the commercial enterprises who benefited massively from her cells, to move to other countries where human rights are just a faint star in a unlimited universe. The Lacks family drew a line in the sand of how far people must be exploited in America. Unfortunately the medical fraternity just moved their operations elsewhere.Tissue and organ harvesting thrive in the world, it is globally a massive industry, with the poorest of the poor still the uninformed donors. An open secret. There are numerous stories, especially in India, where people wake up and realize they were operated on and one of their organs is missing. Stolen. By the time they became aware of it, the organ had already been transplanted in America and elsewhere in the world. That's no secret. Everything is justified as long as science is involved. Nowadays people in other parts of the world sell their organs, even though it is illegal in most countries. According to American laws people cannot sell their tissue, which is part of human organs? People can donate it though, then it is acceptable.Yet someone else can patent your cells, but you're not allowed to be compensated, since the minute it leaves your body, it is regarded as waste, disposed of, and therefor not deemed your 'property' anymore. Huh?This book was a good and necessary read. The human interest side of it, telling the story of the family was eye-opening and excellent. A little bit of melodramatic, but how else would it become a bestseller, if ordinary readers like us could not relate to it. It was very well-written indeed. Thanks to Rebecca Skloot, in 2010, sixty years later, HeLa now has a history, a face and an address. Finally, Henrietta Lacks, and not the anonymous HeLa, became a biological celebrity. In 1951 Dr. Grey's lab assistant handled yet just another tissue sample of hundreds, when she received Henrietta's to prepare for research. She named it HeLa(first two letters of the patient's name and last name). But a few months later she visited the body of the deceased Henrietta Lacks in the mortuary to collect more samples. When she saw the woman's red-painted toenails, a lightbulb went on.Mary Kubicek: Oh jeez, shes a real person. . . . I started imagining her sitting in her bathroom painting those toenails, and it hit me for the first time that those cells wed been working with all this time and sending all over the world, they came from a live woman. Id never thought of it that way.John Hopkins hospital could have considered naming a wing of their research facilities after Henrietta Lack. Why don't they?Nevertheless, this book should be read by everybody. Without it the world would have been a lot poorer and less human.The world has a lot to answer for.RECOMMENDED for sure!EDIT I googled the Lacks family and landed upon the website of the Lacks Foundation, which was started by Rebecca Skloot. news TOTALLY made my day. I wish them all the best and hope they will succeed in their goals and dreams. A wonderful initiative. Just imagine what can be accomplished if every single person, organization, research facility and medical company who benefitted for Henrietta Lacks's tissue cells, donate only $1 (one single dollar)? Yes, just imagine that!So many positive things happened to the family after the book was published. It just brings tears of joy to my eyes. finally: May 29, 2010A Historic Day: Henrietta Lackss Long Unmarked Grave Finally Gets a Headstonethanks to Dr. Roland Pattillo at Morehouse School of Medicine, who donated a headstone after reading The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.african-american american-author american-history Olive Fellows (abookolive)November 3, 2022I finally read it...and all in one day!This is a gripping, moving, and balanced look at the story of the woman behind HeLa cells, which have become critical in medical research over the last half century. Henrietta Lacks had a particularly malignant case of cancer back in the early 1950s. Her cervical tumor grew at an alarming rate and when doctors went to treat it, they took a sample of it. No one could have predicted that those cancer cells would be duplicated into infinity and used for myriad types of testing for many years to come, especially not Henrietta, whose informed consent was not sought for the sampling.Rebecca Skloot became fascinated by the human being behind these important cells and sought to discover and tell Henrietta's story. But first, she had to gain the trust of Henrietta's surviving family, including her children, who were justifiably skeptical about the author's intentions after years of mistreatment. The book that resulted is an interesting blend of Henrietta's story, the journey of her cells in medical testing and her family following her death, and the complex ethical debate surrounding human tissue and whether or not the person to whom that tissue originally belonged to has a say in what's done with it after it's discarded or removed.I can see why this became so popular. The medicine is fascinating, the Lacks family story heartbreaking, and the ethics were intriguing to chew on, even though they could be disturbing to think about at times. I'm glad I finally set aside time to read this one.Click here to hear more of my thoughts on this book over on my Booktube channel, abookolive!December 20, 2015This 2010 work of non-fiction regarding THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS is a sad story and a tough, draining read that shocked me more than once along the way.Henrietta was a poor black woman only 31 years of age when she died of cervical cancer leaving five children behind, her youngest, Deborah, just a baby. Her story is a heartbreaking one, but also an important one as her cancer cells, forever to be known as HeLa taken without her consent or knowledge, saved thousands of lives.Through ten long years of investigative work by this author, this narrative explores the experimental, racial and ethical issues of HeLa (the cells that would not die), while intertwining the story of her children's lives and the utter shock of finding out about their mother's cells more than twenty years later."Physician Seeks Volunteers For Cancer Research." Yeah, right.....So many parts of this book made me sick to my stomach.....like the uncaring treatment of animals and all the poor souls injected with cancer cells without their knowledge in the name of research and greed; and oh, dam Ethel for the inhumane and brutal abuse to Henrietta's children too. Unbelievable!Whew! I must admit to being glad when I turned the last page on this one, but big time kudos to Rebecca Skloot for researching and telling Henrietta's story. She deserved so much better.ebook health medical November 23, 2012Full disclosure: I come to this book from a weirdly fortuitous place. Take my brief, but mind-searing, stint in gynecologic oncology research ca. 2002, which involved a weekly trek to the OR to pick up still-warm tumors, with the women who informedly consented to donate them often open on the table as I did so. Then throw in two years working in a tissue culture hood, two more in a narrative nonfiction book group, and another big chunk of time studying infectious diseases. Mix in interests in social justice, bioethics, the history of science, and mysteries, and youve got me primed for some outsized adoration of Rebecca Skloots The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, because its three main narratives are: 1) The history of tissue culture, particularly the contribution of the immortal, fabulously prolific HeLa cells that revolutionized medical research.2) The life, disease and death of Henrietta Lacks, the woman whose cervical cancer cells gave rise to the HeLa cell line.3) The story of Henrietta Lackss impoverished family, partic