

BOOK CLUB NEWS

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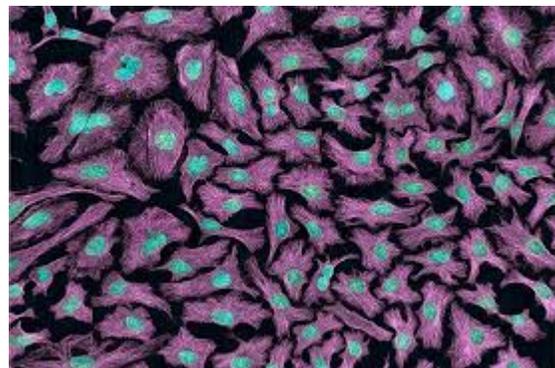
*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot



Discussion Leader: Richard Bass



Henrietta Marks



Hela cells

Mary Marks, who was scheduled to lead the discussion, absented herself to attend the funeral of a beloved uncle. Our sincere condolences go out to her and her family.

*“We must not see any person as an abstraction.  
Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets,  
with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish,  
and with some measure of triumph.”*

Elie Wiesel

from *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code*

Rebecca Skloot, award-winning science writer, spent ten years researching the details of Henrietta Lack’s life and legacy, resulting in this extraordinary piece of non-fiction. It is a work that humanized Science by revealing the person, heretofore unknown, whose cells were taken without her knowledge, cells that have been essential to scientific research around the world for nearly sixty years. Using Mary’s notes and discussion aids provided in the book, we easily found much to discuss, as this is a story of many layers.

We first discussed the moral issues. I confessed about a typo when I first prepared the ballot of nominated books for this season. Can you guess? I wrote *The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Interesting for discussion, but I digress. Explain the relevance of Elie Wiesel’s quote Rebecca Skloot offers us. Should cells have been taken from Henrietta without her knowledge? What is the standard practice of the scientific community? To whom belong cells taken from surgery? Should Henrietta’s family have been compensated? If so, where would the money have come from? Did Henrietta Lacks receive adequate care? Discuss racism and medical treatment; discuss poverty and medical treatment.



Next we focused on the characters in this story. What prevented Henrietta Lacks from going for care? Why did no one know these cells were taken? What was Henrietta's role in the silence? What was the prevalent attitude towards illness at the time regarding informing the patient and/or family of, say, cancer? What is the dichotomy between the uneducated Lacks family and the medical profession? Explain Deborah's desire to know her mother and family. Which members of the Lacks family stood out to you? Henrietta worked on a tobacco farm. What was the role of tobacco in Henrietta's cancer?

In spite of profound appreciation for Rebecca Skloot's perseverance and thoroughness in illuminating this remarkable story, the go-around opinions were mixed. Informative. Learned. Fascinating. Disturbing. Didn't care for the book, but it was interesting medically. This would have been a nice article in *Vanity Fair*; needed condensing. I was intrigued with the relationship of the medical community and the family. My sympathy is with the family. Riveting. Too much about the family. I wouldn't have read this book on my own.

Readers are invited to explore a compassionate [article](#) in the *New York Times*, March 8, 2018, that, looking through obituaries from the middle of the nineteenth century, presents the stories of other remarkable people, including Henrietta Lacks, who heretofore were never memorialized.

Join us June 15, 2018, when we discuss *The Seven Stairs*, by Stuart Brent, led by Marion Kluger. That will be our last meeting of the season until September. Happy reading!