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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot, Crown, 2010

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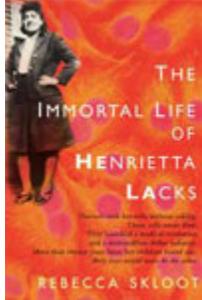
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Recommended Readings



The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

by Rebecca Skloot

Reviewed by Paula Saffire

This book is the perfect mating of biography and science. It is a tale woven of many strands, told by a master story teller. You come to the death of Henrietta Lacks one third of the way through and wonder, "How can Skoot keep it so interesting?" But she does. There are stories of: (1) Henrietta Lacks, a black woman who died in 1951 with tumors so numerous it looked - to those who opened her after death - as if she was stuffed with pearls. (2) Henrietta's cancer cells, known to the world as HeLa, which have been reproduced so successfully that they would circle the earth three times, laid end to end and weight three tons. While most cells die after fifty divisions outside the body, these seem to go on forever. They have been used to fight polio, leukemia, and numerous illnesses. (3) Sorely needed advances in medical ethics, with mention of Nuremberg doctors, the Tuskegee syphilis study, and the birth of phrase, "informed consent. " (4) Evolving policies on tissue ownership. (5) What is going on for Henrietta's extended family - some of whom cannot afford medical insurance although the medical profession owes so much to Henrietta's cells. Skloot tells this story with warmth, appreciation, and respect. She uses, wisely, the language of the people she interviewed, so we can end with Sadie's word-portrait of her generous and joyful cousin: "Hennie made life come alive - bein with her was like bein with fun." Henrietta Lacks is, oddly, still making life come alive. Some see her as a saint.

-Paula Saffire is an Associate Professor of Classical Studies at Butler University.