

# The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks: A Story of Exploitation, Scientific Breakthroughs, and a Black Woman's Legacy

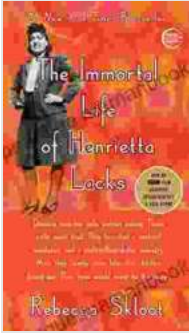


The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is a thought-provoking and haunting story that intertwines medical ethics, race, and the complexities of human life. It is a tale of a woman whose cells revolutionized modern science but whose name and story were largely unknown until the release of Rebecca Skloot's eponymous book in 2010.

**The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks** by Rebecca Skloot

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

Language : English



File size	: 6908 KB
Text-to-Speech	: Enabled
Screen Reader	: Supported
Enhanced typesetting	: Enabled
X-Ray	: Enabled
Word Wise	: Enabled
Print length	: 393 pages



Henrietta Lacks, a young African American woman from Baltimore, was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951. During her treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital, a sample of her cancerous cells was taken without her knowledge or consent. These cells proved to be extraordinarily resilient and became the first human cell line to be successfully cultured in a laboratory. Named HeLa cells, they have since been essential for countless medical advancements, including the development of the polio vaccine, cancer research, and gene mapping.

However, the extraordinary contributions of HeLa cells came at a great cost to Henrietta Lacks and her family. She and her loved ones were never informed of the use of her cells or the substantial profits that resulted from their commercialization. They faced discrimination and poverty while the scientists and institutions that benefited from HeLa cells prospered.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks has sparked important conversations about scientific ethics, social justice, and the legacy of exploitation in medical research. This article delves deeper into Henrietta Lacks's life, the scientific impact of her cells, and the complex ethical issues surrounding their use.

## **Henrietta Lacks's Life and Legacy**

Henrietta Lacks was born Loretta Pleasant in Roanoke, Virginia, in 1920. She moved to Baltimore as a young woman and worked as a tobacco farmer and homemaker. In 1943, she married David "Day" Lacks, a steelworker, and they had five children together.

In 1951, Henrietta Lacks began experiencing abdominal pain and vaginal bleeding. She was diagnosed with cervical cancer and underwent a biopsy at Johns Hopkins Hospital. During the biopsy, a sample of her cancerous cells was taken without her knowledge or consent. This sample became the source of HeLa cells, which have since become one of the most important tools in medical research.

Henrietta Lacks died of her cancer in 1951 at the age of 31. Her family was never informed of the use of her cells or the scientific advancements that resulted from them. They lived in poverty and struggled to access healthcare, while the scientists and institutions that benefited from HeLa cells reaped substantial profits.

In 1973, a researcher named David Baltimore used HeLa cells to isolate the enzyme reverse transcriptase, which is essential for the replication of retroviruses. This discovery earned Baltimore the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1975, but Henrietta Lacks's name was not mentioned in his speech.

It was not until the publication of Rebecca Skloot's book in 2010 that the story of Henrietta Lacks and the exploitation of her cells became widely known. Skloot's book sparked outrage and led to a public debate about scientific ethics and the rights of research subjects.

In 2013, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced that it would create a policy to inform research participants about the potential uses of their biological samples and to obtain their consent before using them. This policy was named the Henrietta Lacks Informed Consent Act.

## **The Scientific Impact of HeLa Cells**

HeLa cells have been essential for countless medical advancements, including:

- \* The development of the polio vaccine
- \* Cancer research
- \* Gene mapping
- \* Drug testing
- \* In vitro fertilization
- \* Stem cell research

HeLa cells have also played a role in the development of new treatments for diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and leukemia. They have been used to study the effects of radiation and to develop new therapies for cancer patients.

HeLa cells are still used in research today, and they have contributed to some of the most important medical breakthroughs of the past century. However, the story of Henrietta Lacks and the exploitation of her cells is a reminder of the importance of ethical research practices and the need to respect the rights of research subjects.

## **Ethical Issues Surrounding the Use of HeLa Cells**

The use of HeLa cells has raised a number of important ethical issues, including:

- \* **Lack of informed consent:** Henrietta Lacks's cells were taken without her knowledge or consent. This raises questions about the ethics of using

human tissue without the consent of the donor. \* **Exploitation:** Henrietta Lacks and her family did not benefit from the commercialization of HeLa cells. They faced discrimination and poverty while the scientists and institutions that benefited from her cells prospered. \* **Racial disparities:** Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman living in a segregated society. Her case highlights the systemic racism and discrimination that black people have faced in medical research.

The ethical issues surrounding the use of HeLa cells are complex and there are no easy answers. However, it is important to be aware of these issues and to make sure that research practices are conducted in an ethical and respectful manner.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is a powerful story that sheds light on the complex ethical issues surrounding medical research. Henrietta Lacks's cells have made important contributions to science, but her story is also a reminder of the importance of informed consent, exploitation, and racial disparities in healthcare.

The story of Henrietta Lacks is a complex one, but it is a story that needs to be told. It is a story of exploitation, scientific breakthroughs, and a Black woman's legacy. It is a story that challenges us to think about the ethics of medical research and the importance of respecting the rights of research subjects.

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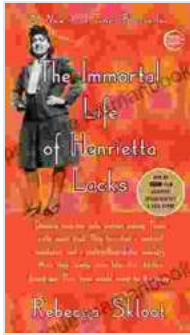
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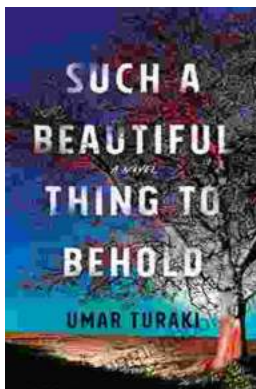


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