

Volunteer Book Review

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, by Rebecca Skloot as reviewed by Anastasia Wheeler

Arguably one of the most important contributors to medical science since the early 1950s is a Black woman named Henrietta Lacks. What she has given to medical research cannot be overstated. Yet, until the 1970s, when her name was leaked to the public, she and her sacrifice were known to very few.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot tells four stories. The book is a biography of Henrietta herself, a look at the ways in which her family is still affected, including a more in depth look at Ms. Lacks' youngest daughter, Deborah, and it is a look at ways in which Ms. Lacks has impacted biomedical research. Ms. Lacks was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951 when she checked into Johns Hopkins Hospital after a severe postpartum hemorrhage. During treatment, without her knowledge or consent, her doctor took cell samples. Those cells were sent to Dr. George Otto Gey's cell biology lab. The HeLa cell line went on to be used in research for the Polio and HPV vaccines, cancer, and genetics. The cells even went to space for a study on long term effects of space travel on living cells, among other significant areas of biomedical research.

Over the course of her research for this book, Skloot develops a personal relationship with Deborah, Ms. Lacks' second youngest child. Deborah struggles with her mother's legacy and the ways in which the medical and research communities have treated them. The thorny issues of ethics is thought provoking. When Ms. Lacks' cells were taken it was not standard practice to seek a patient's consent. In fact, one might be surprised to learn that to this day there is no requirement to inform patients or their relatives about cell harvesting. Biological material obtained during medical procedures is the property of the physician or hospital. The consideration Skloot gives to the ethical implications of Ms. Lacks' and others contributions to biomedical research is one of the strongest parts of the book.

These questions are as important to consider now as when the book was published in 2010. The public health and racial justice issues and even how we as a society approach biomedical research during a pandemic are as relevant as ever.

About the Reviewer

Anastasia Wheeler has an MPH from Boston University and an undergraduate degree in journalism with a minor in history. For the past ten years she has volunteered doing syringe exchange in the Merrimack Valley. Her interest in public health and history is wide ranging.

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