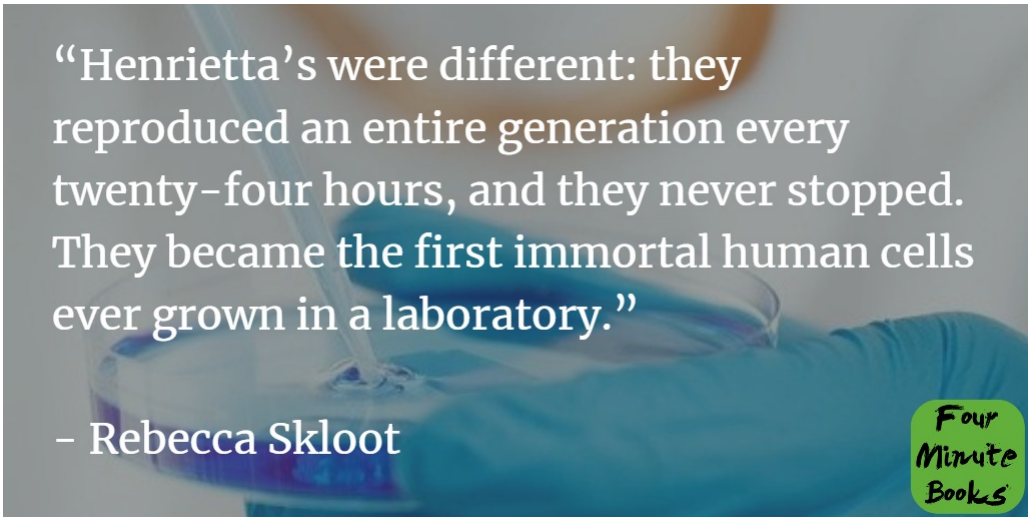
# The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Summary



**1-Sentence-Summary:** *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks makes you smarter and more compassionate by revealing the previously unknown story of a woman with extraordinary cells that still live today and have contributed to dozens of medical breakthroughs.*

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**




If you were to walk into any biomedical laboratory right now, you would come across HeLa cells. They are one of the most important tools in modern medicine. They helped with everything from finding a cure for polio to discovering AIDs and cancer treatments.

These miracle cells have been around since the '50s, but most researchers don't know their origin.

Henrietta Lacks was a poor tobacco farmer and mother of five young children who died of cancer

When they took her cells for biopsy scientists found something amazing. Henrietta's cells reproduced at an incredible rate. Today, long after her death, scientists across the world still grow her cells.

They did all of this without her permission or the knowledge of her family. Journalist Rebecca Skloot gets to the bottom of the story in her book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

Here are the 3 of the most fascinating lessons I've discovered:

1. Henrietta Lacks was a poor black woman who died of aggressive cervical cancer at a young age, but her immortal cells lived on.
2. Even though her cells were famous, most people didn't know of Henrietta and her family until recently.
3. The use of Hela cells has raised questions about privacy and ethics in cell donation.

Let's hop on the Magic School Bus and jump back in time and into the life and cells of Henrietta Lacks!

## Lesson 1: Henrietta died tragically of cancer when she was young, but her cells still live on today.

Henrietta was a poor black farmer who was born in Virginia in 1920. She married young and soon was a mother of five young children. She was 30 when she walked into the coloreds-only exam room at John's Hopkins complaining of a lump on her cervix.

Doctors biopsied the lump, and a while later, the diagnosis came back as stage I cervical cancer. So she started receiving treatment, which at the time involved hours of excruciating exposure to radium. They left her badly burned and were sadly ineffective. She died later that year.

It was at this time that scientists were looking for ways to keep human cells alive outside the body to research diseases. George Gey discovered the roller-tube culturing technique that involved a rotating cylinder that kept the cells in motion.

When they put Henrietta's cancer cells, or "HeLa," in the roller-tube, they were amazed when it actually worked. Not only were they still alive, but they were doubling every 24 hours, faster than the human body.

**The aggressive nature of the cancer cells enabled them to thrive and survive outside a body**. Soon, Gey shared the news of his "immortal human cells," making them an instant celebrity.

## Lesson 2: Though her cells were known around the world, most people knew nothing about Henrietta or her family, until recently.

Though her cells were known and produced around the world, Henrietta and her family were largely forgotten. After her death, her family struggled to make ends meet. Her husband Day had to work two jobs, and her oldest son had to leave school to raise his younger siblings.

The children never knew what happened to their mother, as their father wouldn't talk about

it. Many years later, her daughter got the story from the doctors who were on her case. **Decades later, the family was finally able to learn about Henrietta's condition and the contribution she had made to the field of medicine without even knowing.**

When writing the book, the author reached out to her family, but they were very reluctant to talk to her. Though she was finally able to talk to some of the family, getting information uphill battle because they didn't trust her to tell the story.

She learned they had a general mistrust in medicine because of the medical community's past exploitation of black Americans.

One example of this was the Tuskegee syphilis experiments of the 1930s, where scientists allowed uneducated poor black men to suffer from syphilis and go untreated so they could study the disease.

Even though the history of the exploitation of black people by scientists is documented, there were also many fictional stories that circulated among black Americans. Slave owners would tell stories of "night doctors" that kidnap black people for experiments in an effort to keep them from running away.

## Lesson 3: Henrietta's cells have raised ethics questions regarding cell donation in the world today.

Though Henrietta had rare, aggressive cells that made lab research possible, the same thing can and has happened to others.

One case was a man who had rare leukemia and his cells were similarly taken and marketed without his knowledge. When the man found out, he sued the doctor for profiting off of his cells. But ultimately, the doctor won and continued to market his cells.

Another man who had a special antibody for hepatitis B was actually informed by his doctor of the financial potential he had. Together with researchers, he helped cure hepatitis B.

But the difference here is that Henrietta never even had the chance to claim property rights of her cells, because of her death.

The practice of isolating and marketing a patient's cells without their permission is still not illegal. There are more than 300 million tissue samples stored in the US.

**Doctors require consent to obtain samples. However, they don't have to obtain further consent to use these tissues for research.**

Some believe that the current laws are enough. But many argue the patient has a right to know exactly what their cells will be used for. The future is uncertain, though many committees are now working to provide oversight in tissue sampling.



## The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Review

Wow, what a crazy story! *The Immortal Life Of Henrietta Lacks* has me excited about the science, but also disappointed in the way she was treated. There is a lot of potential to do good in the world if healthcare providers will just be honest with people about how they use their tissue samples!



## Who would I recommend The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks summary to?

The 54-year-old with an interest in history that likes learning about new historical facts that were covered up at the time they happened, the 31-year-old who is in medical school, and anyone that wants to know who they can thank for many advances in modern medicine.