



The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Rebecca Skloot

A tender, true story about Henrietta Lacks, whose cells changed medicine forever, and the family who lived with the consequences. It is part biography, part science journey, part family memoir.

Reading level: Moderate

Best for: A warm, curious club that loves true stories with heart and a side of history

Discussion

WARM-UP

1. What snack, blanket, or comfort did you reach for while reading this one? It can get heavy, so how did you take care of yourself with it?
2. Was there a small moment in the early chapters that made you smile, soften, or want to hug someone? Tell us about it.

DIGGING IN

1. Henrietta is remembered through her family's stories and photos. What is a story or object in your own family that keeps someone you love close?
2. Skloot becomes very tangled up with the Lacks family. Have you ever had a friendship form in an unexpected place that ended up meaning a lot to you?
3. Faith and science sit side by side in this book. Did reading it shift, soften, or comfort the way you hold either one?
4. Deborah's longing to know her mother is so tender. When you think about someone you have lost or never met, what would you most want to know about them?

GOING DEEP

1. Without spoiling anything, what passage left you sitting quietly for a minute? What about it stayed with you?
2. The book asks us what we owe each other, in medicine and in life. After finishing it, what does 'taking care of people' feel like to you now?

On the table

🍽️ **Buttery skillet cornbread**

A nod to the Southern, Virginia roots of the Lacks family, warm from the oven and made for sharing

🍲 **Slow-cooked chicken and dumplings**

Cozy comfort food echoing the home kitchens woven through the story

🍰 **Peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream**

Sweet, homey, and Southern, perfect for lingering over the harder chapters together

To sip

☕ **Sweet tea with lemon and mint (no alcohol)**

Classic Southern porch sipper, non-alcoholic and endlessly refillable

☕ **Spiced apple cider, warm (no alcohol)**

Mug-warming and gentle, good for the quieter parts of the conversation

🍷 **Bourbon hot toddy**

A small indulgent nightcap with honey and lemon for cozy hands and slow talk

Run of show

7:00 Arrive and settle

Greet folks with sweet tea or cider, soft music low, blankets within reach

7:15 Comfort plates

Serve cornbread, chicken and dumplings, let people get cozy before talking books

7:35 Warm-up questions

Use the first two questions to ease in, no pressure to have big takes yet

7:55 Heart of the conversation

Move into the theme questions, leave silences open, let stories unfold

8:30 Cobbler and quiet talk

Bring out dessert and the deeper questions, pour toddies for anyone who wants one

9:00 Wind down

Fill out scorecards together, share one line that stuck with each person, send everyone home with a bookmark

HOST TIPS

- This book carries real grief and real ethical weight, so name that gently up top and let people pass on any question.
- Keep lighting soft (lamps, candles) and have tissues nearby, it sets the cozy, safe tone.
- Have a basket of throw blankets and socks by the door so guests can truly settle in.

Playlist

Soft Southern soul, gentle gospel, and slow folk for low lamplight and slow sipping

01 A Change Is Gonna Come - Sam Cooke

03 Lovely Day - Bill Withers

05 Harvest Moon - Neil Young

07 Hallelujah, I Love Her So - Ray Charles

02 Take My Hand, Precious Lord - Mahalia Jackson

04 I Remember - Yeah Yeah Yeahs

06 Tupelo Honey - Van Morrison

08 Holocene - Bon Iver

Trivia

1. What is the name of the famous cell line that came from Henrietta Lacks? (HeLa cells)
2. In what year was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* first published? (2010)
3. Rebecca Skloot reportedly spent about how many years researching and writing this book? (Roughly a decade)
4. In what U.S. state were Henrietta's family roots, where the tobacco farms in the book are located? (Virginia)
5. At which Baltimore hospital was Henrietta treated? (Johns Hopkins)
6. Skloot founded a nonprofit to help the Lacks family and others like them. What is it called? (The Henrietta Lacks Foundation)
7. HeLa cells were notably used to help develop a vaccine for which disease in the 1950s? (Polio)
8. What genre best describes this book? (Narrative nonfiction (creative nonfiction))

Rate the book

How it made me feel ☆☆☆☆☆

Warmth of the family story ☆☆☆☆☆

Clarity of the science ☆☆☆☆☆

Staying-with-me power ☆☆☆☆☆

Cozy reread potential ☆☆☆☆☆

One word for this book: _____

A moment I want to remember: _____

Who I want to call after finishing it: _____

YOU'RE INVITED

Cozy Night In with Henrietta

Come for cornbread, cobbler, and a warm, gentle conversation about a true story that has stayed with us. Soft pants encouraged.



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