

Book Review: The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

by Gonit Sora - Thursday, August 21, 2014

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The art of writing a scientific biography is a very difficult one and has been mastered by very few writers so far. The task becomes all the more difficult if the subject is somewhat controversial and non-conventional. However, all these factors didn't deter Rebecca Skloot in her fabulous attempt at telling the story of an unsung hero of modern science, Henrietta Lacks. The name of Henrietta may not be so popular with us, but if you abbreviate her name to HeLa, then she becomes something which every biologist and every medical professional has not only heard about, but most probably seen. HeLa is a cell line that was taken from Henrietta's cervical cancer without her knowledge or consent. The book "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" by Skloot tries to tell this story of wonder, deception, anger, science and miracles.

The book begins by giving a brief account of how Henrietta got her life threatening cancer and how doctors taking advantage of that took away a tissue sample from her body that would become the first immortal human cell line in history. The book tells us in poignant details the story of Henrietta, the woman; Henrietta, the mother and finally Henrietta, the cells. When her cells were taken in the 1950s there weren't many laws that asked about patient consent and such, but now the trend is changing very much. Skloot paints a clear picture of where we stand today with not only Henrietta's but cells taken from many other individuals. The book questions the scientists and administrators on issues of ethics and morality and gives some very compelling case histories.

The cell line taken from Henrietta, now known as HeLa has played a pivotal role in many major medical miracles. It has been replicated so many times that now it is virtually impossible to say how many of them are there. HeLa is everywhere, and every drug tested, every vaccine tested has been possible due to HeLa. The polio vaccine, your common cold medicine, etc have all been developed in no small part due to the help rendered by HeLa. But none of the Lacks family members knew about this for decades because of the apathy that the scientists and administrators of hospitals had for them. This book is a wonderful way of rectifying that mistake and giving Henrietta 'the fame she so richly deserves'.

[HeLa Cancer Cell Image](#) via Shutterstock

The book is extensively researched and so well written that it seemed almost unputdownable at times. Based on many hours of interviews with the Lacks family members including Deborah Lacks, one of the main characters portrayed in the book and Henrietta's daughter. This book is not only a treat for all the science lovers but for anyone who wants to read a basic human story that is full of all the basic human feelings of joy, despair, love, hatred and anger. The book not only tells you a beautiful story but it raises many basic questions about the way we do science and about the way we take everything for granted in the name of development of the scientific enterprise.

Rebecca Skloot is not only a brilliant story teller but she is also someone who makes her subject appear so human and lively that sometimes it becomes really difficult not to experience the same feelings as the

protagonist of the book. It is really surprising to learn that this was Skloot's first book. Nowhere in it do we see any apprehension by the author in bringing out the truth, however painful it might be. This is really one of the best science books that have come out in the recent times and deserves to be read widely and appreciated widely.

Title: The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Author: Rebecca Skloot

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Pages: 384

Price: Rs. 450

Rating: 5/5

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