Chapter 1: “The Exam” (1951)

Discussion question: Have you ever known something was wrong with your body before the doctors did? Has someone in your life had that experience? How did you or s/he know? Explain.

Summary: Henrietta is examined at the gynecology clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital by Dr. Howard Jones, and her brief medical history is reviewed. The medical history gives the reader an understanding of Henrietta’s background and sophistication.

Questions

1. What does this chapter suggest to you about Henrietta Lacks’ ability to understand and make informed decisions about her treatment at the clinic?

2. How would you describe Henrietta’s experiences and attitudes toward medical care prior to her cancer diagnosis?

3. Why did Henrietta go to Johns Hopkins rather than another hospital?

4. How would you describe Henrietta’s attitudes toward medical care?

5. What does the term “Jim Crow era” mean?

People Introduced in this Chapter:

• David (Day) Lacks
• Henrietta Lacks
• Sadie
• Margaret
• Howard Jones
• Deborah Lacks
• Joe Lacks

Key Terms:

Chapter 2: “Clover”

Discussion question:

Summary

When her mother dies Henrietta and her nine siblings are split to live amongst their relatives. Henrietta was sent to live with her grandfather, Tommy Lacks, in Clover, VA (Virginia). Her cousin, David (Day), also lives with her grandfather.
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Questions
1. Describe Henrietta’s experiences with segregation when she was growing up in Clover.
2. Describe the home-house that Henrietta grew up in.
3. Describe what life was like for Henrietta growing up (days and nights).
4. Henrietta had her first baby when she was 14 years old. Day (David) was Henrietta’s cousin. They got married when she was 20. They had five Children together. Why was that common back then, and why is that not common now?
5. Why did Henrietta, Day, and Fred move to Baltimore, Maryland? What kinds of jobs were available for black men?
6. Why were jobs at Sparrows Point so attractive to black men, even though they were paid less than white men doing the exact same jobs?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
• Loretta Pleasant
• Eliza Lacks Pleasant
• Johnny Pleasant
• Tommy Pleasant
• Lawrence Lacks
• Lucile Elsie Pleasant

Key Terms:

Chapter 3: “Diagnosis and Treatment”

Summary
Henrietta undergoes radium treatment and surgery for her cancer. The author describes what was known about cancer at the time as well as state-of-the-art treatments. Two tissue samples are taken from Henrietta before her tumor is removed.

Questions
1. What is your impression of medical understanding and treatment of cervical cancer in 1951?
2. Do you believe that Dr. TeLinde’s research was important and justified?
3. What are your thoughts on using radium to treat cancer, when it is also a cause of cancer?
4. Read the Operation Permit (page 31) that Henrietta signed. Do you think it gave the hospital the right to take tissue from Henrietta for research purposes? Do you think Henrietta was able to understand what she was signing?
5. In 1951, doctors did not know much about cervical cancer. They did not know how to treat it or prevent it. Doctors also did research on patients who were poor, and without their permission. Do you think that was right? Why, or why not?
6. Why did the doctor take a sample of Henrietta's tumor and healthy cervical tissue? What did the doctor hope to prove with the cells?

7. The doctors treated cervical cancer with radium. What is radium? Why is it dangerous?

**People Introduced in this Chapter:**
- Richard Wesley TeLinde
- George Gey
- Margaret Gey
- Lawrence Wharton

**Key Terms:**
- Epidermoid carcinoma
- Invasive/noninvasive carcinoma
- Carcinoma in situ

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**Chapter 4: “The Birth of HeLa”**

**Summary**
The tissue samples taken from Henrietta begin to grow...something that had never happened before! George Gey agrees to share the growing cells.

**Questions**

1. Comment on your perception of the sterility of the Gey’s lab.

2. Why do you think George Gey agreed to share the cells?

3. In the 1950s, doctors had not figured out a way to grow cells outside of the human body. Why did Dr. Gey want to grow cells? Why was it so hard to grow cells outside the human body?

4. Why is this Chapter called, “The Birth of HeLa?” How were the HeLa cancer cells different than any other cells in the world?

**People Introduced in this Chapter:**
- Mary Kubicek

**Key Terms:**
Chapter 5: “Blackness Be Spreadin All Inside” (1951)

Summary
Henrietta tries hard to maintain as normal a life as possible while continuing to undergo cancer treatments. At first, the treatments appear to be successful and her tumor disappears. The x-ray treatments charred Henrietta’s skin, turning it black from breast to pelvis. She is surprised to learn that her surgery has made her unable to have children, saying that she had not been informed, even though that was part of standard hospital procedures. While undergoing treatment she is also diagnosed with gonorrhea, probably contracted from Day. Elsie is moved to Crownsville State Hospital.

Questions
1. Describe Henrietta’s reaction to her infertility.

2. How well do you think Henrietta understood her illness? Her treatment?

3. Why was Elsie moved to Crownsville State Hospital? What kind of institution is Crownsville?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
•

Key Terms:
• infertile

Chapter 6: “Lady’s on the Phone” (1999)

Summary
Rebecca Skloot calls Dr. Roland Pattillo at Morehouse School of Medicine to get his assistance in contacting the Lacks family, but he is hesitant. In response to his questions she relates her knowledge of the Tuskegee syphilis study, the Mississippi Appendectomy study, and underfunding of sickle-cell anemia, events that reflected medical mistreatment of African Americans. He gives her some information about the Lacks family, telling her that Elsie had died shortly after Henrietta, and then advises her on contacting Deborah, the only living daughter. Deborah responds very favorably and excitedly to her initial phone call, providing a lot of confusing information. On her second phone call, however, Deborah seems to have become resistant, and says Rebecca needs to “convince the men.” After repeated calls she finally contacts Day, but he hangs up on her.
Questions

1. Why did Dr. Pattillo ask Rebecca Skloot what she knew about African Americans and science before deciding to let her contact the Lacks family?

2. Why do you think Deborah's attitude changed so much from the first phone call to the second?

3. Given the responses from Deborah and Day, are you surprised that Rebecca Skloot continued this project?

4. From what was related in this chapter, how well do you think the Lacks family understood what had been done with Henrietta's cells?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
- Roland Pattillo
- Deborah
- Rebecca Skloot

Key Terms:
- Tuskegee syphilis study
- Mississippi Appendectomy study
- sickle-cell anemia

Chapter 7: The Death and Life of Cell Culture

Summary
Rebecca provides historical context for Gey's breakthrough in human cell growth. Gey shares cells, at no cost, with researchers working to cure cancer. She provides some historical context for understanding the status of cell culture, describing the work of Alexis Carrel, a Nobel-prize winning scientist, who claimed in 1912 to have developed an “immortal chicken heart” cell culture. Ultimately, however, Carrel's eccentric, racist, and pro-Nazi beliefs, and the subsequent revelation that his “immortal” cell line was probably bogus, had tarnished the image of cell culture research. Because of this, Gey's announcement of his immortal cell line received little attention.

Questions

1. Why do you think Gey's breakthrough was ignored by both the general public and the medical community?

2. Why was the development of an “immortal” cell line like HeLa potentially so important to medical research?

3. Do you think Carrel's claims about his immortal cells would go unchallenged today?
Chapter 8: “A Miserable Specimen” (1951)

Summary
Though Henrietta’s doctors told Henrietta she was fine, from June 1951 Henrietta was in increasing pain. At last, doctors confirmed that tumors were growing inside Henrietta. She had no choice but to stay in the hospital. However, radiation treatments and painkillers failed to stop the spread of cancer throughout Henrietta’s body. Cells were again taken from Henrietta without her knowledge.

Questions
1. How did the elevated status of doctors in the 1950s affect the quality of the medical care they gave to their patients, both positively and negatively?

2. What is your impression of the medical care Henrietta received? Do you think it was less than what a white patient might have received?

3. What does “benevolent deception” mean, according to this author?

4. Why did the doctor say that Henrietta was “a miserable specimen”?

5. Do you think that Henrietta received thorough and proper medical care?
Chapter 9: “Turner Station”

Summary
The author travels to Baltimore to try to interview Henrietta’s family. She doesn’t succeed but meets residents in Henrietta’s old neighborhood in Turner Station, outside of Baltimore.

Questions
1. How did Turner Station change from the 1940s to the time the author visited there?

2. Why do you think people were reluctant to talk to the author, Rebecca Skloot?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
- David “Sonny” Lacks Jr.
- Michael Rogers
- Courtney Speed

Key Terms:
- Turner Station
- Clover, Virginia
- reluctant (adj) reluctance (noun)

Discussion Questions
1. If Henrietta had been treated today, what would be similar and/or different about her treatment?

2. If Henrietta had been white (not “colored” or black/African American), would her treatment have been different?

3. If Henrietta had been a male, how would she have been treated differently?

Chapter 10: The Other Side of the Tracks (1999)

Summary
The author goes to Clover, a small, barely surviving small town, and meets Cootie, Henrietta’s cousin, who still suffers from the effects of childhood polio. His stories about Henrietta reveal some of the confusion and misunderstanding about HeLa cells that are shared by many in the Lacks family. He suspects that the cells may have been created by voodoo rather than by doctors, and tells about his own encounters with spirits.
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Questions

1. What do you think of Cootie’s understanding of HeLa cells?

2. Why does the author mention the radio program that is playing in the background when she was talking with Cootie?

3. What is your impression of Clover, given the description in this chapter?

People Introduced in this Chapter:

• Hector Henry, “Cootie”

Key Terms:

• “the other side of the tracks”
• polio
• spirits

Chapter 11: “The Devil of Pain Itself” (1951)

Summary

By September, Henrietta’s body was almost entirely taken over by tumors. She was in constant pain and needed multiple transfusions. Her cousin, Emmett Lacks, brought some of his coworkers to the hospital to give blood, and he saw what extreme pain she was suffering. Her sister, Gladys, and cousin, Sadie, are with her. Doctors ultimately cease all treatment except pain relief. Henrietta understands that she is going to die, and asks Gladys to make certain Day takes care of her children. Henrietta dies in October, 8 months after her diagnosis.

Questions

1. How well liked was Henrietta in the Sparrows Point community?

2. Given the descriptions in this and other chapters, how close was the Lacks family? How does their family compare to your own, or to others you know about?

3. What is your reaction to the medical decisions regarding blood transfusions and discontinuing cancer treatment for Henrietta Lacks?

4. How did Emmett describe Henrietta in the hospital?
Part Two: Death

Chapter 12: The Storm (1951)

After Henrietta’s death Dr. Gey asked that an autopsy be done so that he could obtain tissue samples. Day initially refused an autopsy, but later agreed when told that it would allow them to run tests that might help his children someday. Tissues were removed from multiple organs and stored in petri dishes; tumor growth was extensive. Gey’s assistant remembered realizing that the body was a real person when she saw her chipped toenail polish. Henrietta’s body was returned to Clover for the funeral. There was continual rain prior to and during the funeral, and the Lacks cousins remember that a sudden, deadly storm struck just as her coffin was lowered into the grave.

Questions

1. Why was it a surprise for Dr. Gey’s assistant to suddenly think of Henrietta as a person when she saw the chipped toenail polish? Do doctors and scientists tend to see patients as bodies or specimens rather than as people? What other examples of this can you see in this book? Should doctors and scientists do this? Why or why not?

2. How did the Lacks cousins interpret the sudden storm during Henrietta’s funeral? Do you agree?

3. Are you familiar with the custom of public viewing of a deceased’s body? What significance does this have for a community?

4. How did Cousin Peter interpret the sudden storm? Do you agree?

People Introduced in this Chapter:

- Dr. Wilbur (pathologist)
- Peter Lacks (cousin)

Key Terms:

- code of ethics
- uremia
- autopsy
- deceased
Chapter 13: The HeLa Factory (1951—1953)

Summary:
This chapter describes how Henrietta’s cells spread from Dr. Gey’s lab to the global science community, how Henrietta’s cells were used in the world's first cell production factory, and how HeLa allowed others to make a fortune from the sale and transport of her cells “to any scientist interested...” HeLa, because it was hardy, inexpensive, and quick to grow, became the workhorse for all kinds of cell research, from studying viruses to developing improved methods for growing and shipping cells. The success of HeLa allowed the standardization of methods across the field, allowing important advances in the field, including cloning of single cell lines, determination of the number of chromosomes in the human genome and subsequent study of genetically based diseases. Henrietta's cells began the multibillion-dollar industry of selling human biological materials.

Questions:
1. Compare the experiments on and distribution of Henrietta’s cells done by the Tuskegee Institute with the Tuskegee syphilis studies (p. 50), both conducted by the same Institute at the same time. What are the similarities and differences between the two projects?
2. Do you think that the good brought by research carried out using Henrietta’s cells outweighs the ethical offenses of Dr. Gey and his laboratory?
3. Why is standardization of procedures considered so critical to scientific research? How can that standardization also limit the growth of research?
4. Did Microbiological Associates have the right to begin growing and selling HeLa cells, even though they had played no role in developing them?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
- Jonas Salk
- William Scherer
- Charles Bynum
- Sam Reader

Key Terms:
- ethical
- polio (infantile paralysis)
- neutralization tests
- virology
- transformation and cloning
- standardization of tissue culturing

Chapter 14: “Helen Lane” (1953—1954)

Summary:
From 1954 until the 1970s, the woman behind the HeLa cells would be known either as Helen Lane or Helen Larson. Journalists begin to express an interest in telling the story behind the HeLa cells, and want to know the name of the person who was the source. A Minneapolis newspaper mistakenly identifies her as “Henrietta Lakes.” Another journalist working for the NFIP seeks to write another story, stating that he would like to interview members of her family, but Gey and others at Hopkins refuse to provide it, in part because preserving patient confidentiality was beginning to become standard practice. Henrietta’s family did not know that cells were extracted from Henrietta while she was alive and that her cells still lived in laboratories worldwide.
Questions:
1. Did Gey give accurate information to journalists?
2. In your opinion did Gey act ethically in this matter?
3. Why did George Gey decline to identify Henrietta Lacks for journalists?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
- Helen Lane
- Helen Larson

Key Terms:
- cell culture

Chapter 15: "Too Young to Remember" (1951—1965)

Summary:
This chapter explains what life was like for Henrietta’s children right after she died. Henrietta’s children, especially Deborah and Joe, were forced to endure a traumatic and disheartening childhood after Henrietta passed away. Sonny (4), Deborah (2), and Joe (1) contracted tuberculosis, probably from visiting family members. Lawrence dropped out of school then got drafted and was out of the home for 2 years. Ethel and Galen move into the house to help take care of the children, but Ethel proves to be very strict and harsh in her punishments, especially to Joe, and he grows up angry and mean.

Questions:
1. Choose three words to describe what life was like for Henrietta’s children in the years after her death.
2. Why was Ethel able to get away with treating the Lacks children as she did for so long?
3. Do you get a sense of Deborah’s ambivalence in her feelings about Galen? How did that play a role in her molestation?
4. Why did Joe grow up to be such an angry child?
5. What influence did Bobbette have on Deborah’s life?
6. Do you think it would have been beneficial to Deborah if someone had told her more about her mom and Elsie? Why or why not?
Chapter 16: “Spending Eternity in the Same Place” (1999)

In this chapter, the author meets with several of Henrietta’s relatives to learn more about Henrietta’s life and who she truly was as a person. In Clover, Cootie says that no one ever talked about Henrietta; it was as if she hadn’t existed, except for her children and those cells. Cootie advises the author to talk to another cousin, Cliff. She visits him in his decrepit house, and he takes her to see where Henrietta was buried. Henrietta’s sister, Gladys, confirmed that there was little mixing of the two sides of the family, but said that they were kin to the white Lackses. She also showed Skloot a letter from another sister, Lillian, written in the 1980s, which stated that she believed someone was trying to kill her, because white people were coming around asking questions about her life in Clover and about her sister, Henrietta. Skloot learns that Lillian was very light-skinned, and had “converted” to Puerto Rican because she didn’t want to be black any more.

Questions

1. Who is Cliff and where did he bring Rebecca? Why did he bring her there?
2. Why do the “white” and “colored” Lacks families have different beliefs about their interconnections?
3. Why does Henrietta have some “colored” family members and some “white” family members?
4. In what ways did race affect Henrietta’s upbringing and family life?
Chapter 17: Illegal, Immoral, and Deplorable (1954—1966)

This chapter explains the immoral research that doctors were performing on uninformed patients using HeLa cells. The chapter describes why the National Institutes of Health (NIH) determined that medical research involving human subjects had to be approved on medical ethics. Beginning in 1954, a virologist named Chester Southam examined the possibility that either HeLa cells or virus vaccines derived from those cells could accidentally infect humans with cancer, which he did by injecting HeLa cancer cells into a number of cancer patients, telling them only that he was testing their immune systems.

Questions

1. What were the justifications given for Southam's failure to inform his subjects?

2. What do you think of those justifications?

3. What is your reaction to Southam's comment (p.134) on why he did not inject himself?

4. Explain what the Nuremberg Code is.

People Introduced in this Chapter:

- Chester Southam
- William Hyman
- State Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz

Key Terms:

- Virologist
- Innocuous
- uninformed
- Informed consent
- Nuremberg Code
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- Board of Regents

Chapter 18: "Strangest Hybrid" (1960—1966)

Questions:

1. Why were scientists worried that the medical field of tissue and cell culturing was becoming a disaster? What was going wrong?
2. Up to this point in the book, what are some of the ways that HeLa cells have impacted medicine and medical research? Example- HeLa cells helped to create the Polio vaccination. (Create a list of examples, indicating page numbers from the book).

3. Why was the Cell Culture Collection committee formed? What was their job?

4. What was the purpose behind fusing animal and human cells?

5. Why were some people so against the idea of scientists fusing HeLa cells with animal cells?

6. Do you agree or disagree with scientists creating animal-human cell hybrids? Explain.

People Introduced in this Chapter:  
- George Hyatt  
- Lewis Coriell  
- Robert Stevenson  
- Henry Harris  
- John Watkins

Key Terms:
- L-Cells  
- Somatic cell fusion  
- Hybrid  
- Zero gravity  
- Fuse

Chapter 19: “The Most Critical Time on this Earth is Now” (1966-1973)

Summary:

This chapter describes how difficult life was for both Joe and Deborah. The reader learns about how Joe ends up in prison and why Deborah decides to leave Cheetah to become a single mother.

Questions:

1. Why was Joe nicknamed “Crazy Joe”? Does he live up to that name?

2. What does Joe mean when he writes “the most critical time on this earth is now”? How can you relate to that statement?

3. Compare and contrast the relationship of Deborah and Cheetah to the relationship between Henrietta and Day described at the beginning of the book. How are the relationships similar and different?

4. Predict the shocking news Deborah is about to get. Based on how the author described Deborah at the beginning of the book, how do you think she is going to handle the news?

People Introduced in this Chapter:  
- Alfred “Cheetah” Carter

Key Terms:
- Ominously  
- Insubordination  
- Inferiority complex
Chapter 20: “The HeLa Bomb” (1966)

Summary:
This chapter explains a major cell culturing problem that was discovered in 1966. It was believed that all of the cells that had been cultured and used for medical research up until this point had been contaminated by HeLa cells. If proven to be true, this could be a huge setback for doctors and scientists.

Questions:
1. What exactly was the “HeLa Bomb”?
2. Why were scientists and doctors so concerned with the news that Stanley Gartler delivered at the conference?
3. What would happen to scientific and medical research if Gartler’s idea of HeLa contamination is true?

People Introduced in this Chapter:
- Stanley Gartler
- T.C. Hsu
- Robert Change
- Leonard Hayflick
- Robert Stevenson

Key Terms:
- Ascertain
- Spontaneous transformed human cell cultures
- Cell-line contamination
- G6PD-A


Summary:
In this chapter, we begin to understand how Henrietta’s family feels about her cells being taken from her without consent. The family starts to tell Rebecca Skloot about Henrietta’s life and why they perceive themselves to be victims of an extreme injustice.

Questions
1. What did Sonny tell Rebecca that people said about his mother, Henrietta (how did they describe her)?
2. Why did the family treat Rebecca Skloot differently from journalists who had come around before? What made her different?
3. Rebecca gave up eating pork 10 years earlier to visiting Sonny. Why, when he offered her a pork chop, did she feel this was irrelevant, and accepted the meal from Sonny?

4. Why did Day refuse to follow doctors’ orders and have his gangrenous toes amputated, and why did Sonny refuse to have heart surgery?

5. What did Day say the doctors told him about why they wanted to do an autopsy (topsy) on Henrietta? How was that a lie? Why did Day agree?

6. Who was Johns Hopkins? Why did he establish the Johns Hopkins hospital?

7. Why is this Chapter called, “Night Doctors?” What did some doctors from Johns Hopkins do in the middle of the night? Do you believe this, why or why not? How could that happen? Could something like that happen today?

8. Why do you think the Lacks family were not notified of what was being done with HeLa cells?

9. Suppose Henrietta Lacks had been your mother or grandmother. Would you be as upset as the Lacks family members? Why or why not?

10. Why were the Lacks family members so angry at the end of this chapter?

11. Do you think the Lacks family should have received some sort of compensation for the development and use of HeLa cells? After reading this chapter, what do you think should be done about their claims?
Chapter 22: "The Fame She So Richly Deserves" (1970 -1973)

George Gey, developer of the HeLa cells, was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. He served as a subject for tests of several experimental treatments, but died within months of his diagnosis. A few months after his death several colleagues reviewed the files on Henrietta Lacks as they prepared to write an article on the history of HeLa in honor of Gey. They realized that the original cancer had been misdiagnosed. Although this wouldn't have changed treatment at the time, it might help explain why it had spread so rapidly. Their article was the first public identification of Henrietta Lacks as the source of HeLa. Shortly after that, increased government funding for a war on cancer became available, along with pressure to find the cancer virus. However, the HeLa contamination of other cell lines became a critical problem in this increased research effort. When it turned out that a supposed cancer virus identified in some Russian cancer patients was actually HeLa contamination, the problem began to be publicized in news stories, but identifying the source of HeLa as Helen Larsen or Lane, as had been reported in the 50s. In 1973 an article was published in one of the premier research journals, establishing at last that the name of the woman whose cells lived on in HeLa was Henrietta Lacks.

Questions

1. Would you volunteer to serve as a subject in medical research, as George Gey did? Why or why not?

2. Would you be an organ or tissue donor? Why or why not?

3. What is the difference between epidermoid carcinoma and adenocarcinoma? Would a correct diagnosis have changed the way Henrietta Lacks was treated?

4. Why was HeLa contamination a problem for research seeking a cancer virus?

5. Why was the finding that HeLa cells had contaminated Russian cancer cell research considered so newsworthy?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>People Introduced in this Chapter:</th>
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<td>Walter Nelson-Rees</td>
<td>donor</td>
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Chapter Twenty-Three: “It’s Alive”
1. The title of this chapter contains an allusion to the classic horror movie Frankenstein. What does this allusion suggest about the tension between scientific discovery, and public perception and fear of such discoveries?
2. How did Bobette find out about HeLa?
3. How long had Henrietta been dead when her family found out that her cells were still alive?
4. Why did researchers want DNA samples from Henrietta’s family?
5. Did researchers explain why they wanted DNA samples to the Lacks family? Did the family give informed consent for the research done on those samples?
6. Why did the Lacks family think the doctors were taking their blood?
7. From a legal standpoint, how is the fact that the doctors failed to obtain consent prior to taking blood from the Lacks family in 1973 different from their initial failure to obtain consent from Henrietta in 1951?
8. What were some of Deborah’s fears and concerns after she found out that her mother’s cells were still alive?
9. Why did advances in genetic research necessitate establishing the legal requirement that doctors or researchers obtain informed consent documentation prior to taking DNA samples from patients for research?
10. Analyze the last paragraphs of this chapter. What does Hsu’s request reveal about her attitude towards the Lackses? What does Skloot reveal by ending the chapter with Hsu’s request?

Chapter Twenty-Four: “Least They Can Do”
1. What motivated Michael Rogers to find the Lacks family?
2. How did Rogers discover Henrietta’s real name?
3. Describe Rogers’s interaction with the Lacks family.
4. Paraphrase the paragraph in Rogers’s article that the Lacks family found extremely upsetting. What conclusion did they draw about George Gey and Johns Hopkins?
5. What facts about George Gey’s life support the assertion that he never personally profited from the development of HeLa?
6. Explain how the sale of HeLa evolved into a business. Describe the extent to which the profits from that business are likely a direct result of the sale of HeLa cells. In what other ways do scientists, corporations, and individuals profit as a result of HeLa?
7. Why did Deborah begin researching her mother’s cells? What effect did her research have on her?
8. What information about the Lackses was published by McKusick and Hsu? Why is the publication of this information troubling from an ethical and legal standpoint?
9. Why do you think Skloot ends this chapter with the introduction of John Moore’s story?

Chapter Twenty-Five: “Who Told You You Could Sell My Spleen?”
2. Describe the lawsuit that set a legal precedent for patenting biological “products” such as cell lines.
3. Why did Ted Slavin start Essential Biologicals?
4. Why did scientists find the Moore lawsuit deeply troubling?
5. Summarize the pros and cons of giving patients legal ownership of their cells.
6. What was the Supreme Court of California’s decision regarding the Moore lawsuit? Summarize the reasoning behind the decision.

7. Do you agree with the court’s ruling? Explain your answer.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Breach of Privacy
1. Describe the changes that had taken place in the lives of Henrietta’s children by 1980.

2. Why did Zakariyya decide to participate in research studies at Johns Hopkins? What is ironic about his participation in these studies?

3. Why did Deborah choose not to request a copy of her mother’s medical records?

4. In spite of her deliberate decision to not read her mother’s medical records, Deborah Lacks still learned extremely upsetting details about her mother’s illness and autopsy. Describe how Deborah found out about her mother’s painful death.

5. How did Deborah react after reading about her mother’s death?

6. Explain why Gold’s journalism could be considered irresponsible and/or unethical.

7. What do Gold’s comments about his decision to publish private information without consulting the Lacks family reveal about his attitude toward them?

8. How have laws regarding medical privacy changed since the early 1980s?

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Secret to Immortality
1. Explain how the human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cervical cancer.

2. Are scientists able to definitively explain why HeLa grew so powerfully?

3. Explain the theories that Henrietta’s family have about why her cells are so powerful.

4. Describe the contribution that HeLa has made to research on the HIV virus and the AIDS epidemic.

5. Explain Van Valen’s theory that HeLa cells are “no longer human.” Was his theory accepted by the scientific community?

6. According to Stevenson, why did scientists develop the argument that HeLa cells are no longer human?

7. Who do you think makes the more persuasive argument, Van Valen or Stevenson?

8. Explain the Hayflick limit.

9. Why are HeLa cells able to live beyond the Hayflick limit?

Chapter Twenty-Eight: After London
1. What did Deborah hope would happen as a result of the BBC documentary?

2. What motivated Pattillo to organize the HeLa Cancer Control Symposium?

3. Carefully reread the speech Deborah gave at Morehouse College, paying particular attention to her repetition of the word “understanding.” Why do you think understanding HeLa was so important to Deborah? What obstacles does she mention as impeding her understanding?

4. How did the people in Turner Station react to the presence of the BBC film crew and news of Henrietta’s newfound “fame”?

5. What was ironic about the creation of Speed and Wyche’s Henrietta Lacks Foundation?
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6. Why did Deborah agree to help Speed and Wyche with their museum project?

7. Describe the attempts Wyche made to get recognition for Henrietta and her family.

8. Analyze Johns Hopkins’s official response to Wyche’s letter. Do you feel that it is an appropriate response? What rhetorical strategies are used to counter Wyche’s appeal?

9. Describe Keenan Kester Cofield. Why did he get involved with the Lacks family?

10. How did Deborah discover the truth about Cofield?

11. What did Cofield do when he realized that the Lacks family had blocked his access to their family records? What were the results of his actions?

12. Explain Deborah’s fears regarding her sister, Elsie.

13. Summarize the events in Deborah’s life leading up to her initial contact with Rebecca Skloot. How do these events help explain Deborah’s initial reluctance to talk with Skloot?

14. At the end of this chapter, with Skloot’s phone call, the three narrative threads in the book come together as one, and from this point on, the story moves forward chronologically, no longer moving back and forth between different time periods. Why do you think Skloot structured the book this way?

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Village of Henriettas

1. Why do you think Deborah eventually decided to talk with Skloot?

2. What specific things did Deborah ask Skloot to promise she would do?

3. Explain the significance of the gift that Skloot delivered to Deborah at their first meeting.

4. What did Deborah hope would happen as a result of Skloot’s research about Henrietta?

5. What effect did sensationalized journalism and fiction about HeLa and cell cloning have on Deborah? Do you think this was the response that the writers intended?

6. What information about her mother was Deborah unwilling to share with Skloot? Why do you think she was so protective of this information?

Chapter Thirty: Zakariyya

1. Why wasn’t Skloot excited about meeting Zakariyya?

2. What does Zakariyya’s choice of words—“that damn doctor who done rape her cells”—reveal about his feelings about and perception of what Gey did?

3. Describe your first impression of Zakariyya.

4. What does Deborah do that illustrates that she has a great sense of humor?

5. Look back over Skloot’s description of Zakariyya’s apartment. What do the contents of the apartment tell you about his life and personality? What is important to him?

6. What does Zakariyya believe about his birth?

7. When Skloot met Sonny and Lawrence, they expressed a belief that the medical advances made possible by their mother’s cells are “a miracle.” How do Zakariyya’s beliefs differ from those of his brothers?
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8. Zakariyya uses the term “disrespect” to describe Gey’s treatment of Henrietta and the family. Explain the specific reasons why Zakariyya feels disrespected. Do you believe Gey was disrespectful? Explain your answer.

9. What does Zakariyya blame on Henrietta’s cancer cells? Does Deborah agree with him?

10. What gift does Deborah give Zakariyya? Do you think Zakariyya should be the one to have this object? What does this gift tell you about Deborah’s feelings about her family?

Chapter Thirty-One: Hela, Goddess of Death
1. What does Deborah say about people who frame her mother’s story as a story about racism?

2. Contrast the experience Henrietta’s great-grandchildren, Alfred and Davon, have at the Maryland Science Center with the experience Deborah, Sonny, and Lawrence had growing up.

3. How did Skloot finance the research for her book? What did she promise to do for the Lacks family if and when the book was published?

4. Explain why it would be easy to believe that the Marvel super villain, Hela, Goddess of Death, was based on Henrietta Lacks.

5. Describe the relationship between Deborah and her grandson Davon.

6. Who is Franklin Salisbury Jr., and why did he contact Deborah?

7. Why did Deborah decide to go see her mother’s cells? What obstacle almost kept her from doing so?

Chapter Thirty-Two: “All That’s My Mother”
1. Compare and contrast Skloot’s, Deborah’s, and Zakariyya’s interactions with the Jesus statue at Johns Hopkins. What do these interactions reveal about their attitudes toward religious faith?

2. Analyze the way that Christoph Lengauer interacts with the Lacks family. Why do you think his interaction is so different from anyone the Lackses encountered at Johns Hopkins up until this point?

3. What is Lengauer’s attitude toward the HeLa contamination problem? What belief of Deborah’s does his attitude affirm?

4. Describe the way that Deborah and Zakariyya interact with their mother’s cells.

5. What important misunderstanding about HeLa does Lengauer clarify for Deborah?

6. What does Lengauer believe about the Lackses’ right to be financially compensated for the sale of their mother’s cells?

7. Why do you think Deborah tells Skloot that she “just witnessed a miracle”?

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Hospital for the Negro Insane
1. Does the title of this chapter evoke an emotional response from you? Why do you think Skloot chose this title?

2. Compare the connotations of the name “Crownsville” with the name “Hospital for the Negro Insane.” What do you think the directors were trying to achieve when they renamed the facility?

3. Why did Deborah and Skloot travel to Crownsville?

4. Why was Skloot surprised by the appearance of Crownsville? What do you think she expected to find?

5. Who is Paul Lurz? Which comments of his foreshadow that something terrible happened to Elsie?

6. Why were the hospital’s medical records from the 1950s and earlier disposed of?
7. What part of Elsie’s medical records did Lurz have? Why had he saved patients’ medical records? Why was he surprised that he had Elsie’s records in particular?

8. Skloot carefully describes the photograph of Elsie. What specific things can you infer about Elsie’s treatment based on the description of the photograph?

9. How does Deborah demonstrate that she is in control when her right to view Elsie’s records is questioned?

10. Describe conditions at the hospital during the time period when Elsie was a patient there.

11. Compare and contrast the medical research likely performed on Elsie with Gey’s research and Southam’s research. Does some medical research seem “more wrong”? Why do you think you feel that way?

12. What does Deborah’s comment to Lurz that “if you gonna go into history, you can’t do it with a hate attitude” tell you about the type of person she is?

13. How did Deborah initially react to the news about her sister? How did her reaction evolve after she had a chance to dwell on the picture and process the disturbing information that she had been given?

14. Skloot ends this chapter with Deborah deciding to finally give her access to Henrietta’s medical records. Explain why this moment is significant.

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Medical Records
1. How does Deborah respond when Skloot suggests photocopying some of Henrietta’s records? Why do you think she responds this way?

2. How can you tell that Elsie’s photograph and autopsy are deeply troubling to Deborah?

3. What causes the confrontation between Deborah and Skloot? How is it resolved?

4. What reason does Deborah give for not wanting Skloot to type out Henrietta’s records word-for-word?
5. Why do you think Deborah breaks out in hives after visiting Crownsville and giving Skloot access to the medical records?

Chapter Thirty-Five: Soul Cleansing
1. How are Gladys and Gary related to Deborah?

2. Gary tells Deborah that her quest to find out about Elsie and Henrietta has been a way of “honoring her mother.” Explain what he means by saying this.

3. After witnessing the amount of physical and emotional anguish that Deborah is in, Gary begins to preach and lay hands on Deborah. What burden does he ask to be lifted from Deborah? Where does he ask the burden to be placed?

4. How does Deborah respond after Gary’s prayer?

Chapter Thirty-Six: Heavenly Bodies
1. Summarize Gary’s spiritual explanation for why Henrietta’s cells lived on after her death.

2. Discuss the impact that witnessing the interaction between Gary and Deborah—and, later, talking with Gary—had on Skloot. What new perspective did she gain after these experiences?

Chapter Thirty-Seven: “Nothing to Be Scared About”
1. What physical ailments did Deborah suffer from as a result of the excitement and stress of seeing her mother’s cells for the first time, and learning about Elsie?

2. Why did Deborah decide to go back to school?

3. Why was Deborah unable to attend the National Foundation for Cancer Research’s Henrietta Lacks conference?
4. Explain how Davon’s heroic actions saved Deborah’s life.

5. What obstacle kept Deborah from realizing her dream of returning to school?

6. What did Pullum ask Skloot to “preach” about at JaBrea’s baptism?

7. According to Deborah and Pullum, how is Henrietta’s story going to be different for Henrietta’s great-grandchildren and future generations?

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Long Road to Clover
1. What string of events in 2009 suggests that, if Skloot had not begun researching Henrietta’s story a decade earlier, it may have been lost forever?

2. At the time of this book’s publication, how had the lives of Henrietta’s great- and greatgreat grandchildren been affected by Skloot’s research, and by the knowledge and understanding of Henrietta’s contribution to science?

3. Skloot begins and ends the book with Deborah’s voice. How does this choice impact the reader’s experience of the story?

Where They Are Now/Afterword
1. How did Deborah’s death change the lives of her brothers?

2. What legal options do the Lackses have? What is their position on suing over the use of HeLa?

3. If Henrietta Lacks could know how important her cells have been to science, do you think she would approve of the fact that they were taken from her without her knowledge or consent? Explain your answer.