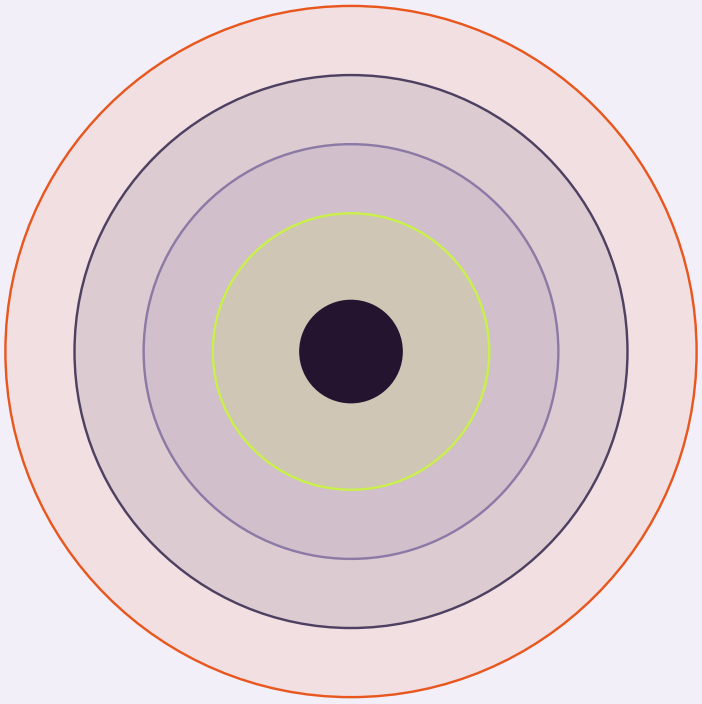


The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

A reading of the book by Rebecca Skloot (2010)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Rebecca Skloot is an American science writer, and this was her first book, the result of more than a decade of reporting. It tells the story of Henrietta Lacks, a Black tobacco farmer's daughter from Virginia and a mother of five, whose cancer cells were taken at Johns Hopkins in 1951 without her knowledge. Those cells, known as HeLa, became the first human cells to keep growing in a lab, and they went on to help test the polio vaccine and to feed decades of research since. Skloot braids three stories together: Henrietta's life and her death at 31, the cells' long career in science, and her family's struggle to learn what happened, told largely through her daughter Deborah. Along the way the book asks who owns tissue taken from the body, what consent should mean, and how race and poverty shaped who was asked and who was told.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Behind every sample is a person with a name, a family and a life.

For decades labs knew the cells only as HeLa, and the name behind them was often given out wrongly as Helen Lane. Skloot starts with the woman instead: a tobacco farmer's daughter from Clover, Virginia, who moved to Turner Station near Baltimore and raised five children. The book keeps returning her to the centre of her own story.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Nobody asked Henrietta, and at the time that was normal, which is exactly the problem.

Taking tissue from patients for research without telling them was routine in 1951. The book does not cast one doctor as a villain. It shows a system in which nobody thought a poor Black patient in a public ward needed to be told, and it traces how slowly the rules changed.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

One woman's cells changed medicine while her own children struggled to pay for a doctor.

HeLa helped test the polio vaccine and fed research into cancer, viruses and much else. Meanwhile the Lacks children grew up poor, and as adults several of them could not afford health insurance. The book sets the two facts side by side and lets the gap speak.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Being told something is not the same as understanding it.

When researchers took blood from the family in the 1970s, the family believed they were being tested for the cancer that killed Henrietta. Nobody explained in plain words what the samples were for. Consent given in language people cannot follow is not really consent.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Who profits from tissue taken from your body is still an open question.

The book follows the case of John Moore, whose doctor developed a commercial cell line from his removed spleen. California's Supreme Court ruled that Moore had no property right in his cells. Companies sold HeLa for years, and the Lacks family received nothing.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Mistrust of medicine usually has a history, and it deserves a hearing.

The Lacks family grew up with stories of night doctors who took Black people for experiments, and with the real record of the Tuskegee syphilis study. Skloot shows why their fear made sense. Explaining, listening and following up are part of good research, not extras.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Grief without answers tends to turn into fear.

Deborah was a small child when her mother died, and she never learned what had happened to her older sister Elsie. With so few facts she worried whether the cells could feel pain and whether her mother was being cloned. Clear information, given with care, eased some of that weight.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Telling someone's story fairly means letting them help tell it.

Skloot spent years earning the family's trust, especially Deborah's, and she put their voices, doubts and anger into the book. She also wrote herself into the story. That choice shows how much listening a fair account of other people takes.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Science can be a gift and a harm at the same time, and both should be said.

The book does not argue that HeLa should never have been grown. It argues that the benefits and the harm happened together. A fair account names the vaccines and the discoveries, and it names the woman and the family who were left out.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Write your own consent questions
- [ ] Reread one form you already signed
- [ ] Check your DNA and health app settings
- [ ] Tell your family what you would want
- [ ] Learn the history behind one treatment

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask one question before you sign
- ◯ Explain it back in your own words
- ◯ Go with someone to an appointment

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Write your own consent questions

Use the checklist on this page to choose what you need to know before you give a sample or join a study.
Save the list in your phone's notes so it is there at the next appointment.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Reread one form you already signed

Find a consent form from a recent hospital visit, lab test or study.
Note what it says about research use, how long samples are kept and who they can be shared with.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Check your DNA and health app settings

If you have used a home DNA test or a health app, open its privacy settings this week.
Look for research consent, sharing and deletion, and set them to what you actually want.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Tell your family what you would want

Talk with one relative about how you would want your tissue, data or organs used after you die.
Write it down, and register as a donor if that is your choice.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Learn the history behind one treatment

Pick a vaccine or medicine you have taken and spend twenty minutes reading how it was developed.
Notice who took part in the research and whether they were asked.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask one question before you sign

Whenever a medical form mentions research, ask what will happen to your sample or data afterwards.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Explain it back in your own words

When a doctor or researcher explains something, say it back to them before you agree.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Go with someone to an appointment

Once a month, offer to go with a relative or friend to a medical appointment, or to help them read their paperwork.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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30 ○						

December 2026

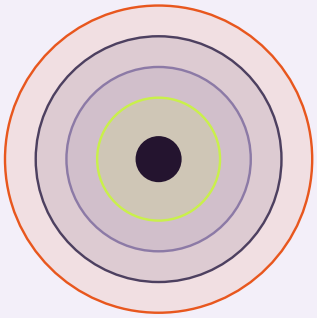
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



The cells became famous as HeLa. The woman was Henrietta, and she should have been asked.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER REBECCA SKLOOT