

Guided Reading Questions

*Prologue and Part One*

Prologue: The Woman in the Photograph

1. The author uses several similes to describe cells. What simile does the author use to describe the way a cell looks?
2. What simile does Donald Defler use to describe mitosis?
3. What happens when there is a mistake during the process of mitosis?

Chapter One: The Exam

1. How long did Henrietta wait between first telling her girlfriends that “something didn’t feel right” and going to the doctor?
2. Why does Sadie think Henrietta hesitated before seeing a doctor?
3. Why did David Lacks take Henrietta to the public wards at Johns Hopkins instead of a closer hospital?
4. Explain what the Jim Crow laws were.
5. What did Howard Jones find “interesting” about Henrietta’s medical history? What does this finding suggest about Henrietta’s cancer?

Chapter Two: Clover

1. Why did Henrietta end up being raised by her grandfather, Tommy Lacks?
2. How was Day related to Henrietta?
3. How old was Henrietta when she had her first child with Day?
4. What was different about Henrietta’s second child, Elsie?
5. Contrast the working conditions of black workers and white workers at the Sparrows Point Steel Mill.

Chapter Three: Diagnosis and Treatment

1. How are different types of cancer categorized?
2. How did doctors justify using patients in public hospital wards as medical research subjects without obtaining their consent or offering them financial compensation?
3. How did TeLinde hope to prove that his hypothesis about cervical cancer was correct?
4. What was George Gey’s position at Johns Hopkins?
5. Explain what an immortal cell line is.

6. Analyze the consent statement that Henrietta signed on page 31. Based on this statement, do you believe TeLinde and Guy had the right to obtain a sample from her cervix to use in their research?

Chapter Four: The Birth of HeLa

1. What were the two main obstacles Gey and his assistants faced in their effort to grow cells?
2. Where did the name “HeLa” come from?
3. What happened to the HeLa cells that Mary cultured?

Chapter Five: “Blackness Be Spreadin All Inside”

1. What was Elsie’s early life like?
2. Why did Henrietta and David (Day) Lacks decide to place Elsie in the Hospital for the Negro Insane?
3. What important information did Henrietta’s doctor fail to give her before starting her cancer treatment? How did she react when this information was eventually shared with her?

Chapter Six: “Lady’s On the Phone”

1. How is Roland Pattillo connected to both Henrietta Lacks and George Gey?
2. How does Deborah Lacks initially respond to Skloot’s request for information?
3. How does Day initially respond to Skloot’s request for information?

Chapter Seven: The Death and Life of Cell Culture

1. What did Gey hope to accomplish with HeLa cells?
2. What did HeLa allow scientists to do for the first time?
3. Who was Alexis Carrel? Why did he win the Nobel Prize?
4. Why was Leonard Hayflick suspicious of Carrel’s immortal cells?

Chapter Eight: “A Miserable Specimen”

1. How did her doctors react to Henrietta’s intuitive conviction that the cancer was spreading inside of her?
2. In your own words, explain the paradox “benevolent deception.”
3. When did the doctors realize that Henrietta had been correct about the growth of her cancer?
4. What does the use of the term “a miserable specimen” by Henrietta’s doctors reveal about their attitude toward her?

## Chapter Nine: Turner Station

1. How does Skloot proceed with her research when it becomes clear that Sonny Lacks is not going to meet with her?
2. Who is Courtney “Mama” Speed, and how is she connected to Henrietta Lacks?
3. What does Skloot realize after watching the BBC documentary about HeLa?

## Chapter Ten: The Other Side of the Tracks

1. Explain the meaning of the idiom “the other side of the tracks.”
2. How was Cootie related to Henrietta?
3. What illness did Cootie have as a child?
4. Cootie seems to know and understand a little bit about HeLa cells, but he believes that Henrietta’s spirit is still present in her cells. What does Cootie think about the reason that HeLa cells were used to develop a polio vaccine?
5. Why does Cootie say that Henrietta’s cancer “wasn’t no regular cancer?”

## Chapter Eleven: “The Devil of Pain Itself”

1. Describe the progression of Henrietta’s cancer in the eight months between her diagnosis and her death.
2. What did Henrietta’s friends and family do when they found out that she needed blood? Why do you think they were willing to sacrifice to help her?
3. What was Henrietta’s final request? What does this request tell you about her?

## *Part Two*

## Chapter Twelve: The Storm

1. Why did Henrietta’s doctors need to ask for her family’s permission to remove tissue samples after her death? How did Day initially respond to their request?
2. What made Day change his mind and allow the autopsy?
3. What did Mary, Gey’s assistant, realize when she saw Henrietta’s painted toenails? How was the timing of this realization ironic?

## Chapter Thirteen: The HeLa Factory

1. Explain how a neutralization test is used to determine a vaccine’s efficacy.
2. What unusual characteristics of HeLa cells made them ideal for use in the polio vaccine trials?
3. Explain how a virus reproduces.
4. Why did the fact that HeLa cells are malignant make them particularly useful in the study of viruses?

5. Why was the development of methods of freezing cells an important scientific breakthrough?
6. Explain the contribution that HeLa made to the emerging field of genetics.
7. Who profited monetarily from the sale of HeLa cells and other human biological materials?
8. In what ways, if any, did Gey personally profit from the development of HeLa?

## Chapter Fourteen: Helen Lane

1. How soon after Henrietta’s death did the media attempt to write about her?
2. What reasons did Berg give for wanting information about the woman whose cells were used to grow HeLa?
3. How did TeLinde, Gey, and others at Johns Hopkins respond to Berg’s request? Why did they respond this way?
4. What two major errors appeared in the stories about HeLa?
5. Why didn’t Henrietta’s family know that her cells were still alive?

## Chapter Fifteen: “Too Young to Remember”

1. How old were Henrietta’s oldest (Lawrence) and youngest (Joe) children when their mother died?
2. What questions did Deborah have about her mother and sister?

## Chapter Sixteen: “Spending Eternity in the Same Place”

1. Skloot visits the Lack’s family cemetery with Cliff. Describe the state of the cemetery. Were they able to locate Henrietta’s grave?
2. How did Henrietta’s family acquire the land that became known as Lacks Town?

## Chapter Seventeen: Illegal, Immoral, and Deplorable

1. What was Chester Southam concerned that HeLa cells might do?
2. Southam’s first research study involved cancer patients at Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research. What was the result of that study? Based on these results, did his hypothesis appear to be validated?
3. Based on the results of the second study, what two things did Southam believe that injections of HeLa cells might be able to do?
4. What does the term “informed consent” mean?
5. Why, specifically, did the Jewish doctors at the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital object to Southam’s cancer study?

6. What is the purpose of the Nuremberg Code? What events led to it being developed?
7. According to State Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz, what do people have an “inalienable” right to?

#### Chapter Eighteen: “Strangest Hybrid”

1. What disturbing discovery did scientists make about the way HeLa responded in orbit?
2. Explain what happens during somatic cell fusion.
3. What scientific discoveries were made possible as a result of fused hybrid cells?
4. How did the public respond to the idea of cell hybrids?

#### Chapter Nineteen: “The Most Critical Time on This Earth is Now”

1. How did Bobette respond to Deborah’s pregnancy?
2. What crime did Joe commit?
3. What was the lawyer’s main argument in Joe’s defense?
4. Why didn’t Deborah go through with her plan to kill Cheetah? What did she do instead?

#### Chapter Twenty: The HeLa Bomb

1. Explain the meaning of the idiomatic expression “to drop a bomb.”
2. What did Stanley Gartler discover about eighteen of the most commonly used cell cultures?
3. What unique abilities did HeLa have that allowed it to contaminate cultures without researchers being aware that contamination had occurred?
4. Why would HeLa contamination be a problem for researchers?
5. What is “spontaneous transformation”? What did Gartler suggest about spontaneous transformation?
6. How did the scientific community respond to Gartler’s theory about HeLa contamination?

#### Chapter Twenty-One: Night Doctors

1. Give an example that reveals that the Lacks family distrusts doctors.
2. What do the Lackses believe Johns Hopkins did to black people?
3. What are “night doctors”?
4. Why did Johns Hopkins start a medical school and hospital in a poor black neighborhood? What purpose was the school/hospital intended to serve?

5. What is the Lacks family’s biggest complaint about the way they have been treated by Johns Hopkins and Dr. Gey?

#### Chapter Twenty-Two: “The Fame She So Richly Deserves”

1. What type of cancer was George Gey diagnosed with?
2. What specific request did Gey make prior to going into surgery? Why didn’t his surgeons honor his request?
3. After finding out that his cancer was terminal, what reason did Gey give for his decision to offer himself as a research subject?
4. What did Howard Jones realize when he reviewed Henrietta’s medical records?
5. Explain how Henrietta’s real name became public knowledge.

#### *Part Three*

#### Chapter Twenty-Three: “It’s Alive”

1. How did Bobette find out about HeLa?
2. How long had Henrietta been dead when her family found out that her cells were still alive?
3. Why did researchers want DNA samples from Henrietta’s family?
4. 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?
5. Why did the Lacks family think the doctors were taking their blood?
6. What were some of Deborah’s fears and concerns after she found out that her mother’s cells were still alive?
7. 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?

#### Chapter Twenty-Four: “Least They Can Do”

1. How did Michael Rogers discover Henrietta’s real name?
2. The Lacks brothers found Rogers’ article upsetting. What conclusion did they draw about George Gey and Johns Hopkins?
3. What facts about George Gey’s life support the assertion that he never personally profited from the development of HeLa?
4. What information about the Lackses was published by McKusick and Hsu?
5. Why is the publication of this information troubling from an ethical and legal standpoint?

#### Chapter Twenty-Five: “Who Told You You Could Sell My Spleen?”

1. Summarize John Moore’s story.
2. Why did Ted Slavin start Essential Biologicals?
3. Why did scientists find the Moore lawsuit deeply troubling?
4. What was the Supreme Court of California’s decision regarding the Moore lawsuit? Why did they come to that decision?

#### Chapter Twenty-Six: Breach of Privacy

1. Why did Zakariyya decide to participate in research studies at Johns Hopkins? What is ironic about his participation in these studies?
2. Why did Deborah choose not to request a copy of her mother’s medical records?
3. 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.
4. How did Deborah react after reading about her mother’s death?

#### Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Secret to Immortality

1. Explain how the human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cervical cancer.
2. Explain Van Valen’s theory that HeLa cells are “no longer human.” Was his theory accepted by the scientific community?
3. According to Stevenson, why did scientists develop the argument that HeLa cells are no longer human?
4. Explain the Hayflick limit.
5. 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. Why did Deborah agree to help Speed and Wyche with their museum project?
3. Why did Kester Cofield get involved with the Lacks family?
4. How did Deborah discover the truth about Cofield?
5. What did Cofield do when he realized that the Lacks family had blocked his access to their family records?
6. Explain Deborah’s fears regarding her sister, Elsie.

#### Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Village of Henriettas

1. What specific things did Deborah ask Skloot to promise she would do?
2. What gift did Skloot delivered to Deborah at their first meeting?

3. 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 believe about his birth?
3. 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?
4. What does Zakariyya blame on Henrietta’s cancer cells? Does Deborah agree with him?
5. What gift does Deborah give Zakariyya?

#### 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. 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?
3. Explain why it would be easy to believe that the Marvel super villain, Hela, Goddess of Death, was based on Henrietta Lacks.
4. Who is Franklin Salisbury Jr., and why did he contact Deborah?
5. 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. 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?
2. What is Lengauer’s attitude toward the HeLa contamination problem? What belief of Deborah’s does his attitude affirm?
3. What important misunderstanding about HeLa does Lengauer clarify for Deborah?
4. What does Lengauer believe about the Lackses’ right to be financially compensated for the sale of their mother’s cells?

#### Chapter Thirty-Three: The Hospital for the Negro Insane

1. Why did Deborah and Skloot travel to Crownsville?

2. Who is Paul Lurz? Which comments of his foreshadow that something terrible happened to Elsie?
3. Why were the hospital's medical records from the 1950s and earlier disposed of?
4. How does Deborah demonstrate that she is in control when her right to view Elsie's records is questioned?
5. 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. What causes the confrontation between Deborah and Skloot? How is it resolved?
3. What reason does Deborah give for not wanting Skloot to type out Henrietta's records word-for-word?
4. 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. 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?

#### Chapter Thirty-Six: Heavenly Bodies

1. Witnessing the interaction between Gary and Deborah—and, later, talking with Gary—had a profound impact 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. What obstacle kept Deborah from realizing her dream of returning to school?

#### 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 great-great-grandchildren been affected by Skloot's research, and by the knowledge and understanding of Henrietta's contribution to science?

#### Important Dates

February 7: Quiz 1 – Prologue and Part 1 (p. 1-86)

February 18: Quiz 2 – Part 2 (p. 89-176)

February 25: Quiz 3 – Part 3: Chapters 23-29 (p. 179-240)

March 4: Quiz 4 – Part 3: Chapters 30-38 (p. 241-310)

March 6: Guided Reading Questions Due (neatly hand-written)

March 11: Cancer Presentations