



This film is the story of a Black woman whose cells were used to create the first immortal human cell line. Told through the eyes of her daughter, Deborah Lacks, the film chronicles her search, aided by journalist Rebecca Skloot, to learn about the mother she never knew and to understand how the unauthorized harvesting of Lacks' cancerous cells in 1951 led to unprecedented medical breakthroughs, changing countless lives and the face of medicine forever. It's a story of medical arrogance and triumph, race, poverty and deep friendship between the unlikeliest of people. Henrietta's cells have been bought and sold by the billions, yet she remains virtually unknown.

Rent on Amazon, Vudu or Apple TV. Buy on Apple TV, Amazon, YouTube or Vudu

Characters

- Henrietta Lacks - A young black woman diagnosed with cervical cancer whose cell sample becomes the famous HeLa cell line.
- David "Day" Lacks - Henrietta's husband and cousin, a poor steel worker. Henrietta and Day grew up on the same tobacco farm with their grandfather, Tommy Lacks. After Henrietta dies, he lets Ethel and her husband move in with them.
- Gladys Lacks - Henrietta's sister
- Deborah Lacks - Daughter of Henrietta Lacks, also goes by Dale
- Rebecca Skloot- The author and narrator of the book, a freelance journalist researching the story of Henrietta Lacks.
- Roland Pattillo - The professor of gynecology at Morehouse Medical College. Patillo organizes the symposium on Henrietta Lacks and first puts Skloot in touch with the Lacks family. He worries for the welfare of the Lackses and so takes the time to quiz Skloot on her knowledge of scientific racism.
- George Gey - The head of tissue culture at Johns Hopkins in 1951, a scientific pioneer whose work creates the HeLa line.
- Lawrence Lacks - Henrietta and Day's oldest son, and the only child with memories of Henrietta.

- David “Sonny” Lacks Jr. - Henrietta and Day’s middle son, the peacemaker of the family and the first Lacks sibling to meet with Skloot in person.
- Zakariyya Bari Abdul Rahman (born Joe Lacks)- Henrietta and Day’s youngest son.
- Elsie Lacks - Henrietta and Day’s older daughter, who has mental health issues
- Bobette Lacks - Lawrence’s wife who eventually takes Sonny, Deborah, and Joe in their home.
- Sadie Sturdivant - Henrietta’s cousin and good friend who used to go dancing with her. When Henrietta first notices her tumor,
- Cousin Cliff- Deborah’s cousin, a deeply religious man who believes he could channel God when called upon to do so.
- Cousin Cootie” - Henrietta’s cousin. He is very religious and believes that Henrietta’s cancer isn’t a natural occurrence, but created by spirits or by doctors
- Sir Lord Keenan Kester Cofield - A smooth-talking con artist who pretends to be a lawyer in order to scam money from the Lacks family.
- Ethel - A cruel woman who heaps emotional and physical abuse on the Lacks children, especially Zakariyya.
- Galen - Ethel’s husband who sexually assaults Deborah and threatens her boyfriend.
- Christoph Lengauer - The researcher at Hopkins who shares images and information about HeLa cells with Deborah and Zakariyya.

Study Guide Questions

1. Who did what with Henrietta’s cells, when, where and why? Who benefited scientifically, medically, and monetarily?

2. Are there spiritual or religious issues surrounding the living tissue of people who have died? How would you name them?

3. Does scientific research look at race? Just think, Blacks and Whites were not even buried in the same cemetery yet this Black woman’s cells were valuable when it came to scientific research. Do you have any thoughts about that?

5. Think about our previous discussion on white savior movies, does this film fit into that category? Does Rebecca consider herself a wonderful helper to the Lacks family because they could not have found out the truth without her?

6. The Lacks family members had a variety of life challenges and experiences. Jot down some of them. What do you think was the cause of the trauma they experienced?

7. Rebecca’s first publisher told her to write the book but leave out the details about the family. How did that make you feel? Do you think their “stories” are a distraction from scientific research?



8. How did you feel about this film and why? Can you analyze your reaction? What surprised you? What disturbed you? What did you learn from this film and how did you learn it?

9. What thoughts came to mind when you saw the photo of Elsie Lacks and found out how she died? If you think back to the Tuskegee Experiment and look at the data on how many Black died from Covid-19 what questions are raised about how racism has and continues to affect the healthcare of Blacks?

10. Henrietta Lacks died in 1951, but her cancer cells are still alive today. Should patient consent be required to store and distribute their tissue for research? Should doctors/medical facilities be required to disclose or share financial gains? How could patients be guaranteed fair settlements?

Challenge Actions for our meeting May 18, 2022

What will you do now to learn more, teach or confront “Segregation by Design”?

- Spend time talking to someone about what you have read and learned and be prepared to share what they learned from you and share the climate of the conversation.
- Attend a city council meeting on Diversity, Economic Development or Housing. Be prepared to share who was in attendance, what was discussed and what was not discussed.
- Consider reading this article from the Marin IJ [Marin Segregation Worsened in the last decade, new UC Berkeley census study finds \(10/12/2021\)](#)
- Consider reading this article from the Brookings Institution. It is a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, DC. Our mission is to conduct in-depth research that leads to new ideas for solving problems facing society at the local, national and global level. [Homeownership, racial segregation and policy solutions to racial wealth equity \(9/1/2021\)](#)
- Consider reading this article also from the Brookings Institution [America's formerly redlined neighborhoods have changed, and so must solutions to rectify them \(10/14/2019\)](#)

Resources about Henrietta Lacks that may interest you

[The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks from John Hopkins Hospital](#)

[The Henrietta Lacks Foundation Established 2010](#)

[NPR KQED Henrietta Lacks: A Promising Immortal Legacy](#)

[USA Today - Oprah disappointed in Lacks family drama, April 2017](#)

[ABC News update - Family seeking justice October 2021](#)