A Guide For Teachers Using
The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
by Rebecca Skloot

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS

Doctors took her cells without asking.
Those cells never died.
They launched a medical revolution
and a multimillion-dollar industry.
More than twenty years later, her children found out.
Their lives would never be the same.

REBECCA SKLOOT

A Lesson Guide
Developed and Designed by
John Schwirian
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This booklet has been designed to help guide instructors through *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. A variety of assignments and lesson plans are provided that can be applied to a wide range of courses. Assignments are identified by theme and skills involved. Work sheets and graphic organizers are included as applicable. These lessons can be used chronologically as you read through the book, or can be organized as needed to accomplish specific goals.

This book touches upon a wide range of academic subjects, and can be easily adapted for use throughout CCBC. Among the areas I feel the book will prove useful are: Science and medicine, sociology, psychology, history, multicultural studies, legal studies, criminology, literature, drama, art, speech, and writing. I am certain that there are several subject areas I inadvertently have overlooked.

In the sections that follow, I have organized various topics from the book by subject and then listed various applicable topics and the chapters and pages in which they can be found.

**Other available resources:**

1. Take a look at what the Library has created at: [http://libraryguides.ccbc.edu/immortallife](http://libraryguides.ccbc.edu/immortallife)

2. See the CCBC Community Book Connection page for more ideas including the Liberal Arts Study Guide by Heather Harris, English Department.
Science and Medicine

Scientific research is one of the major themes of the book. It discusses the nature of research, the methods used, legalities involved, questions of ethics, and even provides a historical perspective.

- Research conducted on human beings is addressed throughout the book, however, chapter 17 particularly focuses on this issue. It refers to Dr. Mengala’s work in World War II and the Nuremberg Trials. Also mentioned here (and elsewhere) is the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study. This opens many possibilities for research projects, debates, etc. over the rights of the individual versus the needs of society. This could also be used in a compare contrast assignment regarding research on humans and research using animals.

- Henrietta’s medical history is provided on page 16.

- Chapter 5, pages 32-33 has a nice explanation of the history and medical use of Radium, which could be particularly useful in the radiology program.

- The nature of HeLa cells and people’s initial response to the phenomenon is reminiscent of the current debate over the use of stem cells. Read page 58 for a compare/contrast assignment.

- The nature of DNA is addressed often.
  - Nature versus Nurture, a topic easily inferred throughout the book, is more directly addressed on pages 247-248 by Zakariyya.
  - The Human Genome Project is mentioned on page 181.
  - Privacy issues regarding an individual’s DNA, particularly genetic discrimination, is discussed on pages 187 and 198.

- Cloning is another recurring theme as myths about cloning are often brought up by the Lacks family. More realistic fears, such as creating “designer babies” are also referenced. Check out pages 214 and 246 for some specific examples.

- Controversy regarding the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is another hot topic (see pages 212-213).


- The nature of cell cultures is another focus of the book. Chapter 20, page 97 speaks in great detail of the use of cell culture in research as well as describing the phenomena known as spontaneous transformation.

- A discussion of cell division occurs on page 265.
• The reasons why we age are explained on page 216. A nice summation of the Hay Flick Limit and the job of telomeres.

• Of course, cancer is the major concern here; however, chapter 20 provides some explanation as to the nature of cancer as we understand it today.

• A discussion of congenital disorders, including hereditary syphilis, can easily be pulled from the history of the Lacks family. Look at pages 116-117 and page 268 for some examples.

• What is the Hypocratic Oath and how should it be applied? Look to page 128 for data to fuel a discussion.

• Here is a great topic for debate. Several Jewish doctors refused to carry out the orders of their superior in a research project. Students can identify the nature of the conflict and speculate as to the reasons why the Jewish doctors chose to disobey. Pages 130-134, chapter 17.

• Page 298 provides a nice diagnosis of Deborah’s condition.

• The Lacks family’s lack of health insurance can easily be developed into a project about the current Healthcare crisis in America. President Obama’s plan can be investigated, as well as comparisons to other countries’ ways of providing healthcare. (see page 169)

**Drama**

Depending on the level of the students in your class, many possibilities exist for creativity here:

• Do character studies (behaviors, speech patterns, manner of dress, etc.). Part III is excellent for this – look especially at Deborah and Zakariyya.

• Translate a setting from the book into a stage scene. How can it be reproduced with scenery, lighting, etc.?

• Examine the use of dialects in the book, from Ebonics to southern to Bawlamarese.

• Compare situations in the book to related plays like *A Raisin in the Sun*.

• Do a short performance piece based on a section of the book.

**Art**

Pages 234 and 252 show two ways HeLa cells were developed into artwork. There are many concepts and ideas in this book that could be developed into artwork by CCBC students.
A major theme throughout the book is the question of individual human rights versus the needs of humanity. How are our rights defined by the law as opposed to individual beliefs is an issue frequently discussed. Additionally, several other legal issues more directly related to criminal activity are addressed at various times in the book.

- The issue of our Constitutional rights is one of the major themes. This is an opportunity for research, discussion, and debate.

- Who actually owns human tissues removed in an operation? Compare to the legal stance regarding discarded items in one’s garbage put out for collection.

- The Constitution guarantees us a large degree of privacy; however, current developments in DNA research have opened new questions regarding the individual’s right to privacy versus the public’s need to know. Additionally, corporations are copyrighting individual gene segments, creating more problems regarding privacy and ownership.

- Research regarding the history of and current status of “consent” could be a project for your class. Look at pages 31 and 131-133 as well as all of chapter 17 for details.

- Another project could be centered around the rights of the mentally challenged. Again, research the history of and the current status of these individuals’ rights. Chapter 33 will be useful for this purpose.

- Many opportunities for mock trials occur throughout the book. Students could develop legal strategies for Henrietta, Elsie, or the Lacks family in general. Another possible mock trial would be the case of the Jewish doctors who refused to follow their superior’s orders in experimentation on prisoners (page 130-134).

- Chapter 19 provides a great example of several of the problems facing residents of poor, “ghetto” neighborhoods. Discussion could include the nature of inner city violence, drug culture, and domestic violence. A case study could be done on Crazy Joe Lacks or Alfred Jr.

- Of particular interest is the case of Sir Lord Keenan Kester Cofield, an individual who used his knowledge of the legal system to conduct fraud and file ridiculous law suits. See Chapter 28 for his story.

- Discuss the nature of justice. What is justice? Did the Lacks family ever find justice? View this from several different points of view.
Social Sciences

This book features many ideas that easily apply to sociology and psychology studies. Likewise, any history class looking at the twentieth century will find this book useful. Cultural studies, psychological profiles, and historical issues are all interrelated and weave their way throughout the text. Listed below are just a few ideas and suggestions one could pull from the text.

- Explore the culture and history of Turners Station and Sparrows Point. Page 221 provides some information in this area.
- What is the nature of “ghetto” culture? How is it that some “escaped” Turners Station to better lives? Kweisi Mfume, astronaut Robert Cabean, Jr., and Kevin Jeffrey Clash (voice of Elmo on Sesame Street) were all able to move on to better lives. How did they do it? Are they giving back to their old neighborhood?
- Explore the history of Johns Hopkins hospital. Who was Johns Hopkins? What was his intent for the hospital? How did the institution live up to his intentions?
- Using the Lacks family as a case study, explore the issues of:
  - Inner city violence
  - Prison culture Islam conversions
  - Drug culture
  - Welfare and poverty
  - Value of education
  - Life in a community (what is a community?)
- Women’s issues are a major theme in the book. Look at the life of a single mother, spousal abuse, role models in Turners Station, etc.
- Page 166 introduces information about the history of the Ku Klux Klan. Look at the evolution of the Klan. What is the Klan today? It is active here in Maryland – particularly in Western Maryland and Cecil County.
- Discuss the “Jim Crow” culture and segregation. (pages 121-125)
- Compare religious beliefs to scientific theory (a strong theme through part III). Can they co-exist peacefully?
- Perform a psychological case study on any of the Lacks family. Deborah, Zakariyya, and Elsie are excellent candidates.
- What is hereditary syphilis? How does that affect the brain?
- Chapter 33 provides great detail about the Hospital for the Negro Insane. Here is an opportunity for a cultural or historical examination for perspective and progress.
- Examine the nature of urban legends like “Hopkins gonna git me” and the Immortal Chicken Heart among others. How do they start? How do they grow?
- Students can do a family history project (see lesson plan later in this booklet).
Writing, Speech, and Journalism

This book is so rich in writing possibilities that I could not begin to address everything one could do with it. Below, I present some ideas for specific types of writing assignments, but I doubt that I have even begun to scratch the surface.

- Poetry – Deborah expressed her feelings in a poem on page 280. Students could take any of the themes of the book and develop poems of their own.
- Story telling - Examine the nature of urban legends like “Hopkins gonna git me” and the Immortal Chicken Heart among others. How do they start? How do they grow? Create an urban legend of your own.
- Journalism – discuss how a journalist recreates a story. How the reporter collects information and then decides how to present it.
- Journalism – interviewing skills. Students can interview relatives about family history or participate in Professor Bill Barry’s project on the history of Sparrows Point (see sample assignments in following section).
- Personal reflections/free writes are a healthy way for students to get ideas flowing and a great way to start a class. Place the writing prompt on the board/screen and students get right to work as they arrive, giving the instructor time to set up for class and take attendance.
- Vocabulary – the book is rich in terminology and words students do not use on a regular basis. A sample list is provided in the next section.
- Descriptive writing – students can examine settings from the book like Clover and Turners Station and the lobby of Johns Hopkins Hospital. They can also look at characterizations like Deborah (page 230) and Zakariyya. Pull out Skloot’s descriptive language. How does she use adjectives and actions to describe people? Students can do a first-hand observation and then develop it into a description of their own.
- Paraphrasing – look at page 97 and have the students describe the nature of the HeLa cells in their own words.
- Sequencing – Skloot creates a kind of a time line, presenting events in the order that they happened while simultaneously showing the order in which she learned this information. Students could create a time line for the Lacks family, for individual family members, for the HeLa cells, or for Skloot the journalist.
- Article summary and reaction – Skloot refers to many subjects that could be the subject of further explanation via an article. Examples include the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Nuremberg Trials, Dr. Mengela, Jim Crow laws, segregation, etc.
- Investigation/research essay – countless possible topics exist here for a research essay. Look to the previous section for ideas.
- Compare/contrast essay – Two possible subjects for comparison are Deborah with Zakariyya and HeLa cells with stem cells. Certainly many more exist.
• Persuasion topics – students can take a stance on cloning, scientific research, consent, genetic discrimination, healthcare, and ownership of tissues among many possible subjects.

• Analysis/cause and effect essays – hmmm, where to start? A few possibilities include the combination of STDs and cancer cells leading to the “birth” of the HeLa cells, the role of genetics in determining a person’s behavior later in life (Zakariyya), how the question of individual rights of possession and privacy will affect scientific research, etc.

• Debate and speech – look back to the sections on legal subjects and science topics for controversial ideas to research and debate in class.

Glossary

Provided below is a list of terms that may prove problematic in your classroom. Students can look them up in a dictionary before beginning reading, or you can refer to them as they occur in the book.

Adenocarcinoma
Analgesic
Androgen
Antibodies
Antigen
Biochemical
Black Panthers
Biopsy
Biotech
Carcinoma
Cervix
Enzyme
Epidemoid
Epithelial Cells

Genome
Genotype
Hybrid
Hysterectomy
Lesions
Leukemia (hairy cell)
Malignant
Morphologic
Mytosis
Pathology
Phenotype
Somatic Cells
Syphilis
Telomere
Family History Project

Having students research their own individual family history, much as Rebecca Skloot recreated the Lacks family’s history, can be a fun and rewarding project. However, there are some pitfalls to be aware of before beginning such a project.

The traditional nuclear family is no longer the primary family structure in the United States today. Many non-traditional forms now exist, including children with multiple parent-figures (birth parents as well as step-parents), children raised by relatives, children whose siblings have a different mother/father, adopted children, same sex parents, among many more examples. We have to be careful not to construct the project so as to alienate children from non-traditional family structures. The formal family tree is one such way to created ill feelings about the project.

Tracing the genealogy of the family name can create issues as well. Tracing records on the Internet can be misleading as there is no guarantee the information is authentic or applicable to that specific family. Records become even more frustrating to find for the African-American student who is descended from former slaves whose names were changed upon arrival in America or even when moving from one owner to the next.

Here are some options which make the project more open ended and accessible to all students.

1. Have the students do as Rebecca Skloot did and interview various family members. It is important to record all the wonderful oral stories in the family for posterity’s sake before they get lost. Possibilities include how parents/grandparents met; how an individual survived hard times; relatives who fought in a war; tales about how things have changed over the decades; etc.

2. Students could trace their medical/genetic family history. Thinking like a doctor, they could list or map out relatives who have had diabetes, heart conditions, cancer, or genetic disorders. My family tree included two genetic disorders: Huntington’s Disease and Parkinson’s Disease. Huntington’s took the life of my great grandfather and two of his three daughters. The third daughter was my grandmother, the only one who had children and fortunately the only one who did not inherit the gene. Students can then diagnose or predict medical issues they may be at risk for.

3. Students could create maps tracking family immigration and migrations as far back as possible. Has their family always been in this area, or did they migrate
Lacks Family Tree

Albert Lacks-------Maria
(White plantation owner) (Former slave)

Tommy Lacks 4 Other Children

Johnny Pleasant Eliza Lacks Other Children
Pleasant

8 Other Children

Gladys Lacks (Loretta) David Lacks

Henrietta----“Day” Lacks

Gary Lacks

Lawrence----Bobette Lucille David Jr. Deborah Alfred Joe
Lacks Elsie “Sonny” Lacks “Dale” “Cheetah” Lacks Lacks

(Carters (Zakariyya Bari Abdul Rahman)

Alfred Jr.

Little Alfred

LaTonya

Davon Meade

**Some of Henrietta’s Cousins
- Margaret Sturdivant
- Sadie Sturdivant
- Cliff Garret
- Fred Garret
- “Crazy Joe” Grinnan
- Galen ---- Ethel
The American Dream for “Negroes”

What do you know about life in the 1950s for a “colored” person?
Class discussion on “Jim Crow” Laws and other pre-MLK Jr. issues.
(This can become a research project or an interview project with an older relative or neighbor)
Compare/contrast life for a “Negro” and a white person prior to desegregation.
The web-site below has some excellent suggestions for approaching this subject.
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/education_lessonplan.html

For further reading/discussion:

_A Raisin in the Sun_ by Lorraine Hansberry
and poetry by
Countee Cullen (“Incident”) and
Langston Hughes
(samples provided below)

**COLORED CHILD AT CARNIVAL**

Where is the Jim Crow section
On this merry-go-round,
Mister, cause I want to ride?
Down South where I come from
White and colored
Can’t sit side by side.
Down South on the train
There’s a Jim Crow car.
On the bus we’re put in the back—
But there ain’t no back
To a merry-go-round!
Where’s the horse
For a kid that’s black?

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen."
Then

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

**What happens to a dream deferred?**

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise:
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.
Stereotyping, Censorship, and Political Correctness.

“If you pretty up how people spoke and change the things they said, that’s dishonest. It’s taking away their lives, their experiences, and their selves.” – Deborah Lacks

There is a movement in this nation to “pretty up” how we speak and how our literature is presented. It is called political correctness.

Define political correctness, multiculturalism, and censorship. At what point does political correctness become censorship?

Students can do a summary reaction essay in response to “Let’s Just Ban Everything” by Rev. Jerry Fallwell provided on the next page.

Another example for discussion is the Harvard professor who replaced the “N” word from Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn with the word slave (see the web link below).
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032619/#40934174

What happened to free speech and freedom of choice?

How does sanitizing literature and history change its value to society?
Let's Just Ban Everything!
By Rev. Jerry Falwell

California school officials have issued new textbook regulations that are designed to keep "offensive" material from hurting anyone's feelings.

And how do you keep from offending people?

Invoke censorship.

Fox News reported this week that a variety of phrases, images and historic references have been suppressed in order to afford a more politically-correct environment for students. After examining the things that have been banned, it becomes evident to any clear-thinking individual that these school officials are more concerned with rewriting history and manipulating the minds of children than they are with actually teaching.

Here are just a few of the directives California educators have mandated for their textbooks:

- The nation's "Founding Fathers" must be referred to as "the Framers," to avoid any implication that they were what they were – men. You know, these great men typically wore powdered wigs and wore frilly clothes, so maybe we should refer to them as our "Founding Cross Dressers," or the "Founding Transgenders." (Then again, maybe I shouldn't make such suggestions because, as ludicrous as it sounds, some California educator might think it's not such a bad idea.)

- Images of unsafe foods – hot dogs, sodas, cake, etc. – have been banned. Maybe we should appease the unyielding animal-rights activists and not depict any meat dishes, at all. Better yet, maybe we should suggest in our textbooks that meat eaters – probably 90 percent of Americans – are the equivalent of murderers.

- Mount Rushmore can no longer be pictured because "it appears to offend" some Indians – I mean Native Americans. I say tear Mount Rushmore down if it is so offensive. Just blow it up. This nation of "inclusion" should not boast a monument that does not include a minority, a homosexual, a dolphin or a handicapped individual.

- Even yachts cannot be depicted in California textbooks because they are seen as elitist. Well, aren't houses seen as elitist to homeless people? Maybe photos of cars should also be banned. In fact, shouldn't all photos be banned since many people can't afford a nice camera? And don't books come from trees? Should we even have books in our schools when they come at the expense of the trees?

You get the picture.
Our nation is comprised of a growing number of people who have made an art form of being offended, and California educators are determined to mollify them.

This is, of course, an unending proposition. The list of offenses will continue to grow and censorship-minded California officials will eventually find their textbooks full of empty white pages – unless white pages are also found to be offensive.

"I think our textbooks should to our greatest capacity be free of any type of stereotyping," Sue Stickel, who is "deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction" for the California Department of Education, told Fox News. (Ms. Stickel, I'd bet that 90 percent of California students can't even spell or define the word "stereotyping.")

This spirit of suppression is not exclusive to California education officials. We see it all across the nation. People are offended by the Ten Commandments, the Pledge of Allegiance, prayers at high-school football games, pro-adoption license plates, etc. And as soon as these people complain, some left-leaning judge or city official can typically be found to authorize a ruling to squelch the offending activity or image. (By the way, how is it that conservatives are typically portrayed as book burners when it is the left that is so comfortable with silencing those with whom they disagree?)

Unless we are prepared to ban everything in our nation – because virtually everything can be made to appear offensive – we had better start electing political leaders and school officials who understand that education is supposed to be about the free exchange of ideas and actual teaching. We'd better get serious about putting people in power who will not acquiesce to those who are habitually insulted or offended by even the most innocuous things.

And now that I've finished this column, I think I'll head over to McDonalds in my SUV.
Prof. Bill Barry's Sparrows Point History Project

Prof. Bill Barry, director of labor studies on the Dundalk campus, has been studying the history of the Bethlehem Steel Mill at Sparrows Point, Maryland for several years now. He is documenting the growth of the Mill itself as well as the community surrounding it.

As part of his project, he has been conducting interviews with people who worked at the Steel Mill. He has a long list of individuals he would like to interview, but cannot get to everyone in a timely fashion.

You might be able to develop a lesson or project around Prof. Barry’s research. He has interview subjects lined up and can provide equipment to record the interview.

This is a great opportunity for a journalism class, or a sociology study. Professors Michael Walsh (Speech), Anne Roberts (English), and Patricia Quintero-Hall (Office of Multicultural Affairs) have adapted this idea for their classes, creating a project revolving around the Turners Station community that will culminate in a presentation on Thursday, December 1 on the Dundalk campus.

Contact Prof. Barry at bbarry@ccbc.md.edu or call (443) 840 3563.