Your Name

Instructor Name

Course Number

Date

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

The “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks” book is halfway between journalistic documentary, biography and popular science. In parallel, we discover three distinct narratives. The story of Henrietta Lacks and her cells deserves to be known to all as she is exceptional and incredible. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks written in a fairly basic style, presents several aspects ranging from popular science to the story of the family epic.

The history of the rules and abuses in this area told by the author shows us that there has been a clear progress since the time of Henrietta Lacks. The final chapter also shows us that everything is not settled. Henrietta finds herself in the position of a plowman who finds a treasure in his fields, with the difference that alone, she would not have discovered this treasure nor been able to enjoy it. Companies have made a fortune in replicating and reselling HeLa cells, but in general, it's mostly looking for the benefit of the humanity that these cells served. So what to do? How to prevent the descendants of Henrietta from being so poor as to be unable to afford the doctor? And why only them? In what way are they more deserving?

Her name was Henrietta Lacks. She saved many lives without even knowing it. Thanks to its cancer cells, used without its consent, named HeLa, several vaccines and scientific advancements have emerged. It is, among others, with her that protection against Polio was possible. This book, which is in a way the biography of Henrietta Lacks and her relatives, tells us their stories as well as their torments. Because, indeed, a local doctor extracted sick tissues on Mrs. Lacks before her death, without having had, previously, the authorization. Her family was stunned to learn that their mother's cells were still alive, many years later, and that

This is the story of Henrietta Lacks, a young black American woman working in the tobacco fields and whose cancer of the uterus has led to major scientific discoveries. It is the cells cultured under the name of HeLa that have survived and have allowed many drug trials and have helped to understand the mutations of bacteria and other viruses. It was in 1951 that the doctors at John Hopkins Hospital of Baltimore discover the malignant tumor of Henrietta Lacks, she is 31 years old and complains of a knot in the belly. It is this knot that will kill her and make her immortal. Immortal by its cells, the first ones that will survive a culture and that will establish a vaccine against polio, but also many discoveries in the field of bacteriology, genetics, oncology, laboratory techniques (Skloot).

This is his life and family (especially his children and grandchildren) discussed in this book, how they have recognized and learned to accept the immortality of their own and the fact that part of Henrietta could be taken without his consent. Half novel, half scientific document, this book addresses all topics: science, scientists and their thirst for discovery, segregation, slaves working tobacco fields, consanguineous marriage, methods of cancer care of the 50s , the benefits derived from these HeLa cells while the Lacks family still lives in extreme poverty.

Personally, I was very surprised to learn how little we have as a citizen. Were you aware that when you collect blood, for example, it is likely that scientists will keep your samples and DNA for research without you being notified? According to the law, they are waste left on the spot, thus recoverable by anybody. But if we had a single cell that would be worth gold for pharmaceutical companies, why would not we benefit?

It is a touching book, moving, which brings to great reflections on this subject which remains too often unnoticed, but which is heavy consequences. Congratulations to Rebecca Skloot, who has kept promise to loved ones (who has no recourse against pharmaceutical giants). She created a non-profit organization to help Ms. Lacks' direct family: Dental Care, Prosthetics, etc. Because, unfortunately, they are poor and cannot even get quality services, despite what their mother did for science.

It is this incredible story that the author begins to tell us in this book halfway between popular science book and biography. In the first part, the story alternates skillfully between the chapters devoted to the progress of science and those dedicated to the life of Henrietta Lacks. the reader thus learns, thanks to simple explanations, what are the cells, the culture and freezing techniques of these, or some notions of genetics. Rebecca Skloot also chose to make us discover the fate of Henrietta Lacks, this young African American woman born in the 20s in Virginia and who remains unknown to the general public despite her contribution to science (Nisbet, Matthew C., and Declan Fahy).

Through his biography, we dive into America in the 50s, still strongly marked by segregation. The second part of the book then focuses on the heirs of Henrietta Lacks (whom the author had great difficulty meeting and convincing) and on the way in which they have apprehended the story of their mother (which has been hidden from them for years). This part of the story is much less convincing because it has many lengths and repetitions and finally brings little to the general purpose.

To conclude, this is a very detailed survey (the author took more than ten years to write this book) that pays tribute to Henrietta Lacks and discusses exciting debates on ethics (patient consent). , patients' rights over their own tissues) and society (inequalities in care, profits generated by laboratories, etc.).

Works Cited

Skloot, Rebecca. The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks. Broadway Books, (2017).

Nisbet, Matthew C., and Declan Fahy. "Bioethics in popular science: evaluating the media impact of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks on the biobank debate." BMC medical ethics 14.1 (2013): 10.