Guided Reading and Discussion Question for HeLa Chapters 23 to 27.

Chapter 23: “It’s Alive”

1. The title of this chapter contains an allusion to the classic horror movie *Frankenstein*. What does this allusion suggest about the tension between scientific discovery, and public perception and fear of such discoveries?

2. How did Bobette find out about HeLa?

3. How long had Henrietta been dead when her family found out that her cells were still alive?

4. Why did researchers want DNA samples from Henrietta’s family?

5. Did researchers explain to the Lacks family why they wanted DNA samples? Did the family give informed consent for the research done on those samples?

6. Why did the Lacks family think the doctors were taking their blood?

7. From a legal standpoint, how is the fact that the doctors failed to obtain consent prior to taking blood from the Lacks family in 1973 different from their initial failure to obtain consent from Henrietta in 1951?

8. What were some of Deborah’s fears and concerns after she found out that her mother’s cells were still alive?

9. 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?

10. Analyze the last paragraphs of this chapter. What does Hsu’s request reveal about her attitude toward the Lackes? What does Skloot reveal by ending the chapter with Hsu’s request?

Chapter 24: “Least They Can Do”

1. What motivated Michael Rogers to find the Lacks family?

2. How did Rogers discover Henrietta’s real name?

3. Describe Rogers’s interaction with the Lacks family.

4. Paraphrase the paragraph in Rogers’s article that the Lacks family found extremely upsetting. What conclusion did they draw about George Gey and Johns Hopkins?
5. What facts about George Gey’s life support the assertion that he never personally profited from the development of HeLa?

6. Explain how the sale of HeLa evolved into a business. Describe the extent to which the profits from that business are likely a direct result of the sale of HeLa cells. In what other ways do scientists, corporations, and individuals profit as a result of HeLa?

7. Why did Deborah begin researching her mother’s cells? What effect did her research have on her?

8. What information about the Lackses was published by McKusick and Hsu? Why is the publication of this information troubling from an ethical and legal standpoint?

9. Why do you think Skloot ends this chapter with the introduction of John Moore’s story?

Chapter 25: “Who Told You You Could Sell My Spleen”


2. Describe the lawsuit that set a legal precedent for patenting biological “products” such as cell lines.

3. Why did Ted Slavin start Essential Biologicals?

4. Why did scientists find the Moore lawsuit deeply troubling?

5. Summarize the pros and cons of giving patients legal ownership of their cells?

6. What was the Supreme Court of California’s decision regarding the Moore lawsuit? Summarize the reasoning behind the decision.

7. Do you agree with the court’s ruling? Explain your answer.

Chapter 26: Breach of Privacy

1. Describe the changes that had taken place in the lives of Henrietta’s children by 1980.

2. Why did Zakariyya decide to participate in research studies at Johns Hopkins? What is ironic about his participation in these studies?

3. Why did Deborah choose not to request a copy of her mother’s medical records?
4. 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?

5. How did Deborah react after reading about her mother’s death?

6. Explain why Gold’s journalism could be considered irresponsible and/or unethical.

7. What do Gold’s comments about his decision to publish private information without considering the Lacks family reveal about his attitude toward them?

8. How have laws regarding medical privacy changed since the early 1980s?

Chapter 27: The Secret to Immortality

1. Explain how human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cervical cancer.

2. Are scientists able to definitively explain why HeLa grew so powerfully?

3. Explain the theories that Henrietta’s family have about why her cells are so powerful.

4. Describe the contribution that HeLa has made to research on the HIV virus and the AIDS epidemic.

5. Explain Van Valen’s theory that HeLa cells are “no longer human.” Did the scientific community accept this theory?

6. According to Stevenson, why did scientists develop the argument that HeLa cells are no longer human?

7. Who do you think makes the more persuasive argument, Van Valen or Stevenson?

8. Explain the Hayflick limit.

9. Why are HeLa cells able to live beyond the Hayflick limit?