Guided Reading and Discussion Question for HeLa Chapters 6 through 11.

Chapter Six: Lady’s On The Phone
1. Who is Roland Pattillo and how is he connected to Henrietta Lacks and George Gey?
2. Paraphrase the information on page 50 describing the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.
3. What do the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Mississippi Appendectomies suggest about the history of African Americans and medicine?
4. Why do you think Pattillo agreed to help Skloot contact Henrietta’s family?
5. What does Pattillo tell Skloot about Elsie Lacks?
6. How does Deborah Lacks initially respond to Skloot’s request for information?
7. What questions does Deborah have about her mother?
8. 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. How did the media react to Carrel’s announcement that he had grown immortal chicken heart cells?
5. What controversial beliefs did Carrell have?
6. Give an example of the propaganda that was used to fuel the public’s fear and distrust of tissue culture.
7. What details suggest that Carrell’s claims about the immortal cell line were not scientifically sound?

Chapter Eight: “A Miserable Specimen”
1. After her initial round of treatment, what did Henrietta’s doctors assume about the effectiveness of the radium therapy?
2. How did her doctors react to Henrietta’s intuitive conviction that the cancer was spreading inside of her?
3. In your own words, explain the paradox “benevolent deception.”
4. When did the doctors realize that Henrietta had been correct about the growth of her cancer?
5. What objective details suggest that Henrietta was in extreme pain at this point in her illness?
6. What objective details suggest that Henrietta was a devoted and loving mother?
7. What does the use of the term “a miserable specimen” by Henrietta’s doctors reveal about their attitude toward her?
8. While most accounts suggest that Henrietta never met George Gey or knew about HeLa, Laurie Aurelian says that Gey recounted meeting with Henrietta before her death. Do you find this story believable? Use specific facts about Henrietta, Gey, and/or medical practice in the 1950s to support your opinion.
9. If Gey did speak to Henrietta before she died, do you think she would have understood what immortal cells were? Explain your answer.

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. Compare and contrast the Turner Station that Skloot visited in 1999 with the Turner Station that Henrietta experienced as a young woman.
3. What does the fact that the town still has “more than ten churches” suggest about the people in Turner Station?
4. Who is Courtney “Mama” Speed, and how is she connected to Henrietta Lacks?
5. What subjective conclusions can you make about Mama Speed based on the objective details on page 72?
6. Make a prediction based on the foreshadowing regarding Mr. Cofield. What do you think Cofield did?
7. 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. What do the names of the creek and the river suggest about life in Lacks Town?
3. How was Cootie related to Henrietta?
4. What illness did Cootie have as a child?
5. 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?
6. Where does Cootie think Henrietta’s cancer came from?
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. Why did doctors stop giving Henrietta blood transfusions?
3. 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?
4. What was Henrietta’s final request? What does this request tell you about her?