

Henrietta lacks: used
as a means to an end



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph.”

Every person on Earth is multi-faceted: each has more sides to him or her than one would expect. This is why problems occur when people are treated as one-dimensional characters, as this perspective conflicts directly with an individual's inherent human nature. In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, both the media and the scientific community are guilty of treating the Lacks family as a mere collective tool; only Skloot herself shows respect for the family.

Science is based on cold, hard facts, and the attitude the scientific community developed is on par with just that mentality: cold and unfeeling. When Henrietta's cells were taken, she was no longer Henrietta Lacks to the scientists. Instead, she became HeLa, a cell line with no human identity. In fact, there is no recognition given to her for the longest time, and when recognition is given, she is called “ Helen Lane” by the scientists and the media for the longest time. It is this attitude towards Henrietta that later is directed at her family. Hsu attempts to draw more blood from the Lackses even after hearing about their hardships: “ If they are willing, I wouldn't mind to go back and get some more blood” (Skloot 190). The consequence of viewing the Lackses as an abstraction is clear in the scientific community; these people, with unique identities, are treated as lab rats. They were only recognized for their medical potential, and so all other merits of the Lackses disappeared in the scientists' eyes. This approach may seem justified for scientific purposes, but this is a problem because this is a violation of the

family's inherent moral worth. Such an approach is also problematic because it reduces the worth of the Lacks family; if there is no distinction in function between a lab rat and a human, that signifies a serious lack of morality which is bad for society as a whole.

While the scientific community had minimal interest in the actual life of Henrietta, the major news companies had a larger interest. If this interest had been used ethically, the story of HeLa could have been known much better; however, that is not what happened. The media made it seem as though the scientists had done no wrong. During the filming of the BBC documentary, Zakariyya becomes angry because of the claim that Henrietta “donated” her cells to the scientists: “He yelled and threw programs when he saw that they listed...Henrietta as the woman who ‘donated’ the HeLa cells” (220). In this sense, the news companies played a catalytic role in preventing the world from truly knowing the truth. It was because they only viewed the Lacks family as a subject for a story that they did not work harder to find out about the truth. The media also sensationalizes many of the scientific findings using HeLa cells: “One was called HUMAN, PLANT CELLS FUSED: WALKING CARROTS NEXT? The other was MAN-ANIMAL CELLS BRED IN LAB” (238). This tactic only acts to further alienate Henrietta from her family and scares Deborah into believing that her mother had become part plant and was in excruciating pain. The nature of the news stations violates the principle of viewing an individual as a universe; this is why the high-profile media could never help the Lacks family, as the help they needed was not publicity but somebody who would tell their multi-faceted human story.

Rebecca Skloot, as an independent author struggling to write about the truth, was the only person to truly view the Lacks family as a group of people with their own stories to tell. For one, Rebecca did not sensationalize anything she wrote in her book. Her main motive was not money but was the quest to find out more about a topic that seemed shrouded by time. She realizes that the Lackses are a living family rather than a group of test subjects or money-makers, so she sets up the trust fund that helps the Lacks children to further their education in the future. Above all however, she has actual human contact with the family. She talks, eats, and spends sleepless nights with Deborah, learning not only about Henrietta but about the history of Deb's life as well. She also grows a small bond with Devon, as they get to see each other often through the close relationship Deb and Rebecca maintained. She also does something the scientific community and the high profile media never attempted: she educates the family on Henrietta's cells. She explains how a cell works to Lawrence and brings Deborah and Zakariyya to learn and see HeLa cells in person.

Although the scientific community viewed Henrietta as HeLa cells and the media viewed her as a way to make more money, Rebecca Skloot saw a damaged family and did something the other two parties failed to do: she viewed the Lackses as individuals, with a universe within them. By understanding the treasures, anguishes, and secrets of the family, Rebecca was able to avoid the consequences of only looking at life in the abstract and was able to help restore an otherwise hurt family.