



Book Summary

Documents the story of how scientists took cells from an unsuspecting descendant of freed slaves and created a human cell line that has been kept alive indefinitely, enabling numerous medical and scientific discoveries.

1

PROLOGUE - The Woman in the Photograph

2 There's a photo on my wall of a woman I've never met, its left corner torn and patched
3 together with tape. She looks straight into the camera and smiles, hands on hips, dress suit neatly
4 pressed, lips painted deep red. It's the late 1940s and she hasn't yet reached the age of thirty. Her
5 light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful, oblivious to the tumor growing
6 inside her—a tumor that would leave her five children motherless and change the future of
7 medicine. Beneath the photo, a caption says her name is “Henrietta Lacks, Helen Lane or Helen
8 Larson.”

9 No one knows who took that picture, but it's appeared hundreds of times in magazines
10 and science textbooks, on blogs and laboratory walls. She's usually identified as Helen Lane, but
11 often she has no name at all. She's simply called HeLa, the code name given to the world's first
12 immortal human cells—*her* cells, cut from her cervix just months before she died.

13 Her real name is Henrietta Lacks.

14 I've spent years staring at that photo, wondering what kind of life she led, what happened
15 to her children, and what she'd think about cells from her cervix living on forever—bought, sold,
16 packaged, and shipped by the trillions to laboratories around the world. I've tried to imagine how
17 she'd feel knowing that her cells went up in the first space missions to see what would happen to
18 human cells in zero gravity, or that they helped with some of the most important advances in
19 medicine: the polio vaccine, chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization. I'm
20 pretty sure that she—like most of us—would be shocked to hear that there are trillions more of
21 her cells growing in laboratories now than there ever were in her body.

22 There's no way of knowing exactly how many of Henrietta's cells are alive today. One
23 scientist estimates that if you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, they'd weigh
24 more than 50 million metric tons—an inconceivable number, given that an individual cell weighs
25 almost nothing. Another scientist calculated that if you could lay all HeLa cells ever grown end-
26 to-end, they'd wrap around the Earth at least three times, spanning more than 350 million feet. In
27 her prime, Henrietta herself stood only a bit over five feet tall.