Her name was Henrietta Lacks, but scientists know her as HeLa. She was a poor southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine. The first “immortal” human cells grown in culture, they were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the effects of the atom bomb; helped lead to important advances in cloning, in vitro fertilization, and gene mapping; and have been bought and sold by the billions, with devastating consequences for her family.

Now Rebecca Skloot takes us on an extraordinary journey, from the “colored” ward of Johns Hopkins Hospital in the 1950s to stark white laboratories with freezers full of HeLa cells; from Henrietta’s small, dying hometown of Clover, Virginia—a land of wooden slave quarters, faith healings, and voodoo—to East Baltimore today, where Henrietta’s children, unable to afford health insurance, wrestle with feelings of pride, fear, and betrayal.

“What is The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks really about? Science, African American culture and religion, intellectual property of human tissues, Southern history, medical ethics, civil rights, the overselling of medical advances? ... The book’s broad scope would make it ideal for an institution-wide freshman year reading program.”

—David J. Kroll, Professor and Chair, Pharmaceutical Sciences, North Carolina Central University

“The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks was an excellent summer reading selection. Over 2100 first-year students as well as faculty members, research professionals, and university staff took part in over 80 discussion groups during VCU’s Welcome Week. Her message inspired students to become passionate and engaged with both learning and inquiry. Throughout their first semester, the book continued to serve as an excellent model of research writing for our newest students.”

—Daphne L. Rankin, PhD, Associate Vice Provost for Instruction, Virginia Commonwealth University