

Writing Prompts

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Skloot begins the book with the following quote from Elie Wiesel: "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." Analyze the book in light of this quote. Explain the various ways in which both the scientific community and the media are guilty of having viewed Henrietta and her family as abstractions. What are the consequences of this perspective? How is Skloot's different perspective evident in the way she conducted her research and wrote the book?

Consider Deborah's comment on page 276: "Like I'm always telling my brothers, if you gonna go into history, you can't do it with a hate attitude. You got to remember, times was different." How does cultural perspective influence the way history is recorded, taught, and studied? Why is it important to approach history from an objective point of view? Why is this approach sometimes difficult?

In the Afterword, Skloot summarizes the main issues and legislation surrounding the collection and use of human tissue samples. Using her summary as an outline, examine the evolution of laws concerning tissue research and write a persuasive paper on the issue of whether or not people should be given legal ownership of, and/or control over, their tissues.

Discuss the historical and contemporary influence that journalists writing about science have had on public perception and understanding of the subject. Why do you think science reporting is often sensationalized? Why is it important for science reporting to be accessible? How has fear or lack of understanding influenced public policy relating to science?

There is often a tension between religious faith and science. Explore the importance of both religious faith and scientific understanding in the lives of the Lacks family. How does religious faith help frame the Lackses' response to, and interpretation of, the scientific information they receive about HeLa? How does Skloot's attitude toward the relationship between religious faith and science evolve as a result of her relationship with the Lacks family?

Using the book as a guide, describe the process of scientific inquiry. Examine the often contradictory forces of altruism and profit as they influenced research related to HeLa. What are the risks and benefits of allowing profit to guide research? What are the obstacles involved with conducting research purely for altruistic reasons?

Create a time line that begins with the removal of Henrietta's tissue sample and traces the scientific and medical breakthroughs that have been made possible as a result of HeLa cells. Explain how HeLa cells were used in each situation.

After getting out of jail, Zakariyya Rahman participates in a number of research studies in exchange for monetary compensation. Research the laws and the ethical debate over offering payment in exchange for participation in scientific studies, or for the donation of blood, eggs, sperm, or other biological materials. Do people have a right to "sell" their body, tissues, or organs if they wish? What ethical dilemmas could result from financially compensating "donors" and research participants? At what point could compensation become coercive?

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Research the history of scientific experimentation on humans in the United States. What types of experiments have been done, and how did researchers find test subjects? Why did scientists find it necessary to conduct research on human beings? How did the development of HeLa cells change the way research could be conducted? What attempts (e.g. Nuremberg) have been made to govern the way this research is conducted, and how successful have these attempts been?

Study recent legal disputes over the collection and use of tissue samples. Specific cases to consider include the lawsuit filed by the Havasupai tribe against Arizona State University, the lawsuit filed by Texas parents over the collection of blood samples from their newborn children, and the controversy over the University of California at Berkeley's request that incoming freshman submit DNA samples.