

## Great Books Discussion Topics, March 26, 2022

### *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

**Structure** – The book reads like a non-fiction novel, with scenes showing the scientists hard work and challenging ideas interwoven with stories of the Lacks family, past and present. Did this structure work well for you?

**The Lacks Family** – What was your response to Skloot’s description of Henrietta’s personality, upbringing, education, extended family, mentally disabled daughter, and her faith? Did learning the truth about the HeLa cells ultimately help the family? Deborah?

**The Research Scientists** – Did they strike you as evil and selfish? Or simply acting in a way they thought appropriate? Despite their lack of empathy, did you find any of the researchers admirable in their determination to learn and their hard work?

**Christoph Lengauer, Research Scientist** – Did his kindness and patience when working with Deborah and Zakariyya illustrate today’s more respectful approach to research subjects? Was their meeting with him a healing experience?

**Narrator** – Rebecca Skloot includes herself as a character in the book. Did you find this helpful or disruptive?

**Institutional Racism** – defined as “collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture or ethnicity.” Did reading this story, showing the viewpoints of both the Lacks family and the researchers, clarify your perception of institutional racism?

**The State Mental Hospital** – Were you surprised to learn of the “treatment” provided the patients as recently as the 1950’s?

**Informed Consent** - The National Cancer Institute defines “Informed Consent” as follows: “Patients are given important information including possible risks and benefits about a medical procedure or treatments, genetic testing or a clinical trial.”