Medicine on the big and small screen:
The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Starring Oprah Winfrey, Rose Byrne, Renee Elise Goldsberry, Reg E. Cathey

Directed by George C. Wolfe, released April 22, 2017, HBO, DVD/Blu-ray released September 5, 2017

Rated TV-MA, 92 minutes

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"You famous, just nobody knows it," whispers Deborah Lacks (Oprah Winfrey), Henrietta Lacks' daughter, to a tube of her mother's cells near the end of the HBO film, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.*

Rebecca Skloot's bestselling nonfiction book of the same title, published in 2010, details the intertwined medical and family histories of Lacks, an African-American woman whose cancerous cervical cells were harvested without her knowledge. Lacks' tissue provided a continuously replicating cell line (HeLa) that led to a multi-billion-dollar biotech industry, and major therapeutic advances such as the polio vaccine and *in vitro* fertilization.

The book has flourished as both a popular favorite (selling 2.5 million copies), and as an academic text (adopted as the common read at more than 250 colleges and universities).[1]

With Winfrey at its emotional center, the film simplifies the book's complex tapestry of scientific and family history into a human interest story.

Like immortal HeLa cells endlessly replicating, the book and movie franchise has a complicated relationship with race, class, power, and medical ethics.

The first quarter of the book gives Lacks' biography, but Skloot's main narrative thread recounts, from her point of view, her investigation and her interactions with Lacks' descendants, particularly Deborah. In contrast, the film places Deborah at the center as the protagonist in a quest for information about her mother. In obeying the rules of character-driven television drama, the film offers a story that tends to divert attention from medical ethics and foregrounds a crowd-pleasing, problematic narrative of an individual overcoming the daunting obstacles of race, gender, and class.

After an opening montage about HeLa that outlines the history of cell culture, the rise of biotech supply companies, and advances in medical research, Winfrey supplies a sober voice-over as Deborah. She informs viewers that for most of her life she has suffered from her family's silence about her mother who died when Deborah was just a toddler. While Winfrey captures Deborah's emotional lability, her character gains substance as the book research proceeds. Meanwhile, Rose Byrne's portrayal of an ingenuous Skloot doesn't change much; she's the novice journalist who looks chronically puzzled and slightly afraid of the family members she interviews. The family's justifiable wariness of Skloot comes across as paranoia in these scenes, which emphasize class differences between Deborah's family and Skloot. Because the resistance serves as a plot device of presenting an obstacle in the search for information about Henrietta, the family's decades of harassment by researchers, journalists, and even a con artist is never validated.

Renee Elise Goldsberry plays Henrietta as a pretty, warm-hearted, and fun-loving mother with a brilliant smile. Her appearance in sepia-filtered flashbacks splices a dimension of poignancy into the harrowing present of Deborah's desperate quest to learn about her mother.

By contrast, oblique light and murky grey filters dull the scenes of Skloot's initial contact with the family. More color appears in scenes set in Henrietta's rural hometown of Clover, Virginia, as cousins and relatives break the family silence on Henrietta for the first time, apparently warming to Skloot's innocence, in contrast to their Maryland relatives.

The different lighting and palettes that mark various times in the family's past are scored with era-appropriate music such as jazz, R&B, and '70s funk, but the soundtrack relies on folksy Delta blues riffs for transitions and emotional cues, giving the parts of the story that are centered in Clover (where many of the extended family still live) a racially-coded folksiness.

The film's aesthetics and casting choices make Deborah the protagonist, but the plot sequence attributes agency to her in ways that differ from Skloot's account.

In the book, Skloot has been interviewing elderly friends and family about Henrietta's life for a year before Deborah would speak with her.[2] But in the film, Deborah is involved from the beginning of the investigation. Witnessing her own family history as Skloot draws out the elders, Deborah develops into a motivated investigator who becomes almost a research partner with Skloot—a neat turn, and predictable character trajectory for television, but not at all what the book records.

Boosted by a big dose of Oprah-oomph, the film transforms Deborah from bystander into investigator. While increasingly in control of investigation choices, her reaction to what she uncovers is painful to watch.

Medical records—those of her mother, which she possesses, and those she seeks of her sister Elsie, who died of neglect at age 15 while at Crownsville State Hospital for the Negro Insane—are pivots for dramatic high points. Elsie's records reveal that she endured painful experiments, and the film shows an authentic, gut-wrenching photo of the girl's bruised and swollen head that the book only describes. Not only are medical records valuable to Deborah as a means of personal connection with her deceased relatives, but also sharing them for publication carries great significance in terms of the ethics of consent and privacy—the very issues that Skloot brings to national attention.

In addition, the book and film pose many critical medical ethics questions about the roles of race, gender, and class in informed consent, tissue banking, medical privacy, medical abuse, and health care access.

Recently, Lacks' descendants have been giving public talks, and their perspectives are crucial to understanding the impact of the history that Skloot published seven years ago.

Alfred Carter, Jr., Deborah's son, shared his views of the film with me.[3] He served as a consultant on the film, and has a cameo appearance. Overall, he was pleased with the representation of his mother and grandmother; however, he did note that while the film captured some of Deborah's "very good sense of humor," a shortcoming was that "they gave Oprah a heavy southern accent, and my mother didn't have that."

Carter wants audiences "to know that my mother was a caring, giving person. She was also a cosmetologist, a barber, and nail technician with her license for all these things, which were not shown in the book or the movie. I just want people to know that we are not illiterate people from Baltimore who never accomplished anything."

The suppressed history of race-based exploitation in medicine in the mass media (*Miss Evers' Boys* is an exception) is exactly what makes this story film-worthy. The film and book both offer an opportunity to practice antiracist pedagogy,[4] but educators and discussion leaders should ensure safe spaces for dialogue, and use techniques that cultivate contemplative and practical approaches[5] to racial injustice in health care.

The film frames the short life of Lacks, but the story is still unfolding as her extended family engages audiences and students. For those who use the book or the film for study, Carter says, "what happened to my grandmother was tragic. All the good that has come out of it outweighs the bad, but the bad is still there. This wasn't a fictional character, she was somebody's mother, somebody's grandmother. People need to put that in the forefront when they're teaching and learning. She was a human being, so don't take the humanity out of the situation."

References

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