

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Author: Rebecca Skoot

- **Intended Audience**
 - Advanced Placement Language and Composition
- **Brief summary and educational significance**
 - Nonfiction is becoming more emphasized, not only within curriculum, but also with state and national assessment. As a true story, this not only involves medical ethics, but also social issues, such as racial bias, poverty, education, and the boundaries of scientific research. In addition to being a riveting reading experience, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* has become an important educational tool. Praised for its research, reportage, the ethical issues it has raised, and its unique relevance to a wide range of disciplines from the arts and sciences to law, medicine, anthropology, African American Studies, and more. In this novel Skoot explores the background to a medical mystery. By early 1951, Henrietta Lacks, an African American mother of five in Baltimore, has suffered for some time from a painful “knot on [her] womb”. The diagnosis: cervical cancer. Before administering radium for the first time, the attending doctor cut two dime-size samples of tissue, one cancerous and one healthy, without her permission and without informing her, and gave the tissue to a scientist trying to establish a continuously reproducing, or immortal, human cell line for use in cancer research. According to protocol, a lab assistant scribbled an abbreviation of Lacks’ name “HeLa” on the sample tubes.
- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**
 - The story of Henrietta Lacks gives students a view of life in America that is likely unfamiliar. In addition, the book presents the debate over scientific research and invasion of privacy which will continue to be part of their adult lives. This book balances scientific research and social commentary, thus appealing to students who like science and those who enjoy history. The book presents three major aspects: historical, sociological, and scientific. Questions emerge, such as Where does value lie? Is fairness to the individual compatible with fairness to society? Does fairness depend on skin color? In addition, the value of an education is subtly presented in the impact of events, issues and interests on an individual’s quality of life.
- **Potential problems**

- o Some graphic descriptions, sexual abuse, physical abuse
- **Addressing potential problems**
 - o Given sufficient guidance, students find the challenge of the structure gratifying, as the story unfolds. The ambiguities of the text provide for valuable discussion, and the important realization that texts can have various interpretations and meanings. Furthermore, any difficulties of the text should be considered in the context of the expected maturity of advanced level, AP Language and Composition students. The AP Lang. and Comp. course leads into the AP Literature and Composition course which has approval of The College Board. Students in the AP course are tested by The College Board, and curriculum in the course must meet AP as well as local and state criteria