The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Reading Questions

Chapter 5:
1. After her diagnosis and treatment, how did Henrietta behave? What can you infer about her personality based on this behavior?
2. What was Elsie’s early life like?
3. Why did Henrietta and David (Day) Lacks decide to place Elsie in the Hospital for the Negro Insane?
4. Why do you think Henrietta initially chose not to tell people about her cancer diagnosis? What does this decision suggest about Henrietta’s personality?

Chapter 6:
1. Explain who Roland Parillo is. How is he connected to both Henrietta Lacks and George Gey?
2. Paraphrase the information on page 50 describing the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.
3. What do the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Mississippi Appendectomies suggest about the history of African Americans and medicine?
4. What questions does Deborah have about her mother?

Chapter 7:
1. What did Gey hope to accomplish with the HeLa cells?
2. What did HeLa allow scientists to do for the first time?
3. How did the media react to Carrel’s announcement that he had grown immortal chicken heart cells?
4. Give an example of propaganda that was used to fuel the public’s fear and distrust of tissue culture.

Chapter 8:
1. After her initial round of treatment, what did Henrietta’s doctors assume about the effectiveness of the radium therapy?
2. In your own words, explain the paradox “benevolent deception.”
3. What objective details suggest that Henrietta was in extreme pain at this point in her illness?
4. What does the use of the term “a miserable specimen” by Henrietta’s doctors reveal about their attitude toward her?

Chapter 9:
1. How does Skloot proceed with her research when it becomes clear that Sonny Lacks is not going to meet with her?
2. Compare and contrast the Turner Station that Skloot visited in 1999 with the Turner Station that Henrietta experienced as a young woman.
3. Who is Courtney “Mama” Speed, and how is she connected to Henrietta Lacks?
4. Make a prediction based on the foreshadowing regarding Mr. Cofield. What do you think Cofield did?

Chapter 10:
1. Explain the meaning of the idiom “the other side of the tracks.”
2. How was Cootie related to Henrietta and what illness did Cootie have as a child?
3. Where does Cootie think Henrietta’s cancer came from?

Chapter 11:
1. Describe the progression of Henrietta’s cancer in the eight months between her diagnosis and her death.
2. Why did doctors stop giving Henrietta blood transfusions? What did her friends do about it?
3. What was Henrietta’s final request? What does this request tell you about her?