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New School Assignment Part II

In trying to decide what kind of medium to use, I realize that no matter how much effort I put in, I would not be satisfied with the results of using technology to complete this assignment. I do believe that most people work with what they know and are most comfortable. Because I like to write and writing comes easily for me, I chose to write an acrostic poem to explain my feelings about the text. I wanted to focus on the purpose of the book and the interpretive lens used by the author to explain why she wrote the story. I did this by trying to take the author’s point of view in my poem. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot is one of the best books I have read in a long time. I appreciated the author’s work and persistence in completing the book and getting to the truth about what happened to Henrietta Lacks. From a literary standpoint, the scientific information was not as important to me in studying the writing, but I could certainly appreciate the effort and hours that went into the discovery.

I began by using the main character’s name and writing a poem with the letters HENRIEITTA LACKS, but then decided that I needed to use the entire title of the book. It was difficult to keep the focus on the theme of story and what an oxymoron the title itself presents. After all, life, by its definition is finite. We all want to be remembered, but does that really make us immortal? Being immortal in the true sense of the word means living forever, which is what Henrietta Lacks has accomplished with her cells continuing to live. Skloot takes this information and creates a story that, even though is non-fiction, reads like fiction. She brings the family members into the story in such a way as to make them seem like fictional characters she makes real instead of the reverse, which is the reality. I hoped through using the entire title that I would be able to make my point regarding Henrietta Lack’s immortality being more than just being remembered for who she was, and how that is the antithesis of what we think of when we say we want to be immortal.

To start, I wanted to explain that Rebecca Skloot did not write this book to become a Pulitzer Prize winning author. I did research on her (which I like to do on authors that I like) to find out about her and her reasons for becoming a writer. I was intrigued with her as a person (and even began following her on twitter). Her purpose for writing the story was, in my opinion, the theme of the book. She wanted to show what happened to Henrietta Lacks and let the world know the good that came from her cells. I believe that through the story, Skloot shows the magnitude of Henrietta Lack’s contribution to the world, which is what I tried to do in my acrostic.

I didn’t mention the HeLa cells in the poem or the name Henrietta Lacks. This was intentional to show the anonymity that prevails throughout the story. The story is told from the point of view of an anonymous author, in much the same way the main character is anonymous to the world before her story is told. As a mother, I know that Henrietta Lacks wanted to be remembered by her children, however, no one could have foreseen the way in which they would, indeed, remember her. This is the main point of my poem and, I believe, the main point of the book. Whether or not she and her family should have been notified is not as important as her contribution to the world of medicine. That Skloot was able to tell the story and bring recognition to her family is worth noting; however, most of us would rather be here with our loved ones and be able to enjoy life with them than be immortal because of our cells.

Writing free verse using the title of the book as an acrostic, it would have been relatively easy for me to focus on several different aspects of the book; however, because I was so taken by the author and her treatment of the story, I chose to focus more on her and her intent, which I believe led to one of the themes of the book. I started writing the same type of acrostic about the family as a characterization, but I didn’t feel that the emphasis in the book was on the family, or even on the main character herself, as much as it was on the evolution of the story and the reason for telling it. As a teacher, I had to resist the urge to include textual evidence in the poem to show where I got my ideas from and why I chose to write specific lines. Then I began to worry that this simplistic poem didn’t get my point across and do what I had intended. The old school rears its ugly head. As I re-read what I had written, I liked what I said and felt it made the point I wanted to make. I re-wrote lines trying to make my intentions clearer so that it was easy to see that I was trying to show both the reasons Skloot wrote the book and the theme that emerged as a result of those reasons.