

# **BOOK CLUB TO GO!**

## **The Memory Keeper's Daughter**

### **Kim Edwards**

#### **Introduction**

It is 1964 in Lexington, Kentucky, and a rare and sudden winter storm has blanketed the area with snow. The roads are dangerous, yet Dr. David Henry is determined to get his wife, Norah, to the hospital in time to deliver their first child. But despite David's methodical and careful driving, it soon becomes clear that the roads are too treacherous, and he decides to stop at his medical clinic instead. There, with the help of his nurse, Caroline, he is able safely to deliver their son, Paul. But unexpectedly, Norah delivers a second child, a girl, Phoebe, in whom David immediately recognizes the signs of Down syndrome.

David is a decent but secretive man—he has shared his difficult past with no one, not even his wife. It is a past that includes growing up in a poor, uneducated family and the death of a beloved sister whose heart defect claimed her at the age of twelve. The painful memories of the past and the difficult circumstances of the present intersect to create a crisis, one in which his overriding concern is to spare his beloved Norah what he sees as a life of grief. He hands the baby girl over to Caroline, along with the address of a home to which he wants her taken, not imagining beyond the moment, or anticipating how his actions will serve to destroy the very things he wishes to protect. Then he turns to Norah, telling her, "Our little daughter died as she was born."

From that moment forward, two families begin their new, and separate, lives. Caroline takes Phoebe to the institution but cannot bear to leave her there. Thirty-one, unmarried, and secretly in love with David, Caroline has been always been a dreamer, waiting for her real life to begin. Now, when she makes her own split-second decision to keep and raise Phoebe as her own, she feels as if it finally has.

As Paul grows to adulthood, Norah and David grow more and more distant from each other. Norah, always haunted by the daughter she lost, takes a job that becomes an all-consuming career, and seeks the intimacy that eludes her with her own husband through a series of affairs. Feeling as if he's a disappointment to his father, Paul is angry and finds his only release through music. David, tormented by his secret, looks for solace through the lens of his camera, the "Memory Keeper," trying to make sense of his life through the images he captures.

But as *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* so eloquently shows, life is a moving image, unfolding and changing beyond our control. Despite our desire to freeze a moment or to go back into the past and alter events, time presses us forward. With her heart-wrenching yet ultimately hopeful novel, Kim Edwards explores the elusive mysteries of grief and love, and the power of the truth both to shatter and to heal.

(Penguin Group USA)

## About the Author

In the late '90s, Edwards was making a major splash on the literary scene. Her recently published short story collection would soon be pegged for a Whiting Award and the Nelson Algren Award, and would also be an alternate for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Around this charmed time, Edwards heard a story that would ultimately propel her toward a career as a bestselling novelist.

"A few months after my story collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King*, was published, one of the pastors of the Presbyterian Church I'd recently joined said she had a story to give me," she explained in an interview on the Penguin Group web site. "It was just a few sentences, about a man who'd discovered late in life that his brother had been born with Down syndrome, placed in an institution at birth, and kept a secret from his family, even from his own mother, all his life. He'd died in that institution, unknown. I remember being struck by the story even as she told it, and thinking right away that it really would make a good novel. It was the secret at the center of the family that intrigued me. Still, in the very next heartbeat, I thought: Of course, I'll never write that book."

Despite Edwards's quick dismissal of the idea, it would not unhand her. She let several years slip by without going to work on the story, but she never forgot it. When she was invited to run a writing workshop for mentally disabled adults, the experience affected Edwards so profoundly that she started mulling over the pastor's story more seriously. It would be another year before Edwards actually began working on *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, but once she did, she found that it came quickly and surprisingly well-developed.

In *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, a man named David discovers that his newly born son is in fine health, but the child's twin sister is stricken with Down Syndrome. So, the distraught father, who harbors painful memories of his own sister's chronic illness, makes a quick but incredibly difficult decision: he asks the attending nurse to take his daughter to an institution where she might receive better care. Although he tells his wife that the child was stillborn, David's decision goes on to affect the lives of himself and his wife for the following 25 years.

Haunting, dramatic, and moving, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* went on to become a big seller and a critical favorite. *The Library Journal* hailed it as "an enthralling page-turner" and *Kirkus* reviews declared that Edwards "excels at celebrating a quiet wholesomeness..."

Now that Edwards has broken into novel-writing in a big way, she is hard at work on her follow up to her smash debut. "I have begun a new novel, called *The Dream Master*," she says. "It's set in the Finger Lakes area of upstate New York where I grew up, which is stunningly beautiful, and which remains in some real sense the landscape of my imagination. Like *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, this new novel turns on the idea of a secret -- that seems to be my preoccupation as a writer -- though in this case the event occurred in the past and is a secret from the reader as well as from the characters, so structurally, and in its thematic concerns, the next book is an entirely new discovery."

*(Barnes and Noble.com/ Mike Segretto)*

## **Reviews**

"Unfolding the plot over the course of 25 years, Edwards tells a moving story of two families bound by a secret that both eats away at relationships and eventually helps to create new ones." – *Booklist Review*

"First-novelist Edwards excels at celebrating a quiet wholesomeness but stumbles over her storyline." – *Kirkus Reviews*

## **Further Reading**

*Expecting Adam* by Martha Beck

*Tara Road* by Maeve Binchy

*The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd

*I Know This Much Is True* by Wally Lamb

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. When David hands his baby girl over to Caroline and tells Norah that she has died, what was your immediate emotional reaction? At this early point, did you understand David's motivations? Did your understanding grow as the novel progressed?
2. David describes feeling like "an aberration" within his own family (p. 7) and describes himself as feeling like "an imposter" in his professional life as a doctor (p.8). Discuss David's psyche, his history, and what led him to make that fateful decision on the night of his children's birth.
3. When David instructs Caroline to take Phoebe to the institution, Caroline could have flatly refused or she could have gone to the authorities. Why doesn't she? Was she right to do what she did and raise Phoebe as her own? Was Caroline morally obligated to tell Norah the truth right from the beginning? Or was her moral obligation simply to take care of Phoebe at whatever cost? Why does she come to Norah after David's death?
4. Though David wanted no part of her, Phoebe goes on to lead a full life, bringing much joy to Caroline and Al. Her story calls into question how we determine what kind of life is worth living. How would you define such a life? In contrast to Phoebe's, how would you describe the quality of Paul's life as he grew up?
5. Throughout the novel, the characters often describe themselves as feeling as if they are watching their own lives from the outside. For instance, David describes the moment when his wife is going into labor and says "he felt strangely as if he himself were suspended in the room . . . watching them both from above" (p. 10). What do you think Edwards is trying to convey here? Have you ever experienced similar feelings in your own life?
6. There is an obvious connection between David and Caroline, most aptly captured by a particular moment described through David's point of view: "Their eyes met, and it seemed to the doctor that he knew her --- that they knew each other --- in some profound and certain way" (p. 12). What is the significance of this moment for each of them? How would you describe the connection between them? Why do you think David married Norah and not Caroline?

7. After Norah has successfully destroyed the wasps' nest, Edwards writes that there was something happening in Norah's life, "an explosion, some way in which life could never be the same" (p. 139). What does she mean, and what is the significance of Norah's "fight" with these wasps?
8. When David meets Rosemary (p. 267) it turns out to be a cathartic experience for him. What is it about her that enables David to finally speak the truth? Why does he feel compelled to take care of her?
9. The secret that David keeps is enormous and ultimately terribly destructive to himself and his family. Can you imagine a circumstance when it might be the right choice to shield those closest to you from the truth?
10. What do you think Norah's reaction would have been if David had been honest with her from the beginning? How might Norah have responded to the news that she had a daughter with Down's Syndrome? How might each of their lives have been different if David had not handed Phoebe to Caroline that fateful day?

*(Reading Group Guides)*