



Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

Memory Keeper's Daughter

by Kim Edwards (Viking, 2005)

Target Audience: Adult readers who enjoy emotional, compassionate family dramas.

Synopsis: Dr. David Henry, is forced to make a split-second decision when he recognizes that his wife is giving birth to twins and one of them has Down Syndrome. The decision he makes haunts him and his family for the rest of their lives and sets the scene for the rest of the novel. A moving, heart wrenching story!

Author Biography: Kim Edwards was born May 4, 1958 in Killeen, Texas. She attended Auburn Community College and obtained a B.A. from Colgate University in 1981. While studying at the University of Iowa, she obtained both an M.F.A in 1983 and an M.A. in 1987. She married Thomas Clayton in 1987 and they have 2 daughters. She is an assistant professor of writing at the University of Kentucky and has taught at both Washington University and Warren Wilson College. Five years of her teaching has been in the countries of Malaysia, Japan and Cambodia.

Memory Keeper's Daughter is Kim Edward's first novel. Prior to this novel, she wrote numerous short stories. Her short story "The Way it Felt to Be Falling" won the Pushcart Prize and her story collection *The Secrets of a Fire King* was a 1998 PEN/Hemingway award finalist. Her short story "Sky Juice" won the Nelson Algren Award in 1990. She won the following awards for *Memory Keeper's Daughter*: Kentucky Literary Award for fiction, 2005, Barnes and Noble Discovery Award, and Sainsbury's Popular Fiction Award, 2008.

Reviews:

Publisher's Weekly

"Edwards' assured but schematic debut novel (after her collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King*) hinges on the birth of fraternal twins, a healthy boy and a girl with Down syndrome, resulting in the father's disavowal of his newborn daughter. A snowstorm immobilizes Lexington, Ky., in 1964, and when young Norah Henry goes into labor, her husband, orthopedic surgeon Dr. David Henry, must deliver their babies himself, aided only by a nurse. Seeing his daughter's handicap, he instructs the nurse, Caroline Gill, to take her to a home and later tells Norah, who was drugged during labor, that their son Paul's twin died at birth. Instead of institutionalizing Phoebe, Caroline absconds with her to Pittsburgh. David's deception becomes the defining moment of the main characters' lives, and Phoebe's absence corrodes her birth family's core over the course of the next 25 years. David's undetected lie warps his marriage; he grapples with guilt; Norah mourns her lost child; and Paul not only deals with his parents' icy relationship but with his own yearnings for his sister as well. Though the impact of Phoebe's loss makes sense, Edwards's redundant handling of the trope robs it of credibility. This neatly structured story is a little too moist with compassion."

Booklist

"David Henry's life was turning out as he hoped. He was a doctor, married to a beautiful woman, Nora, with a baby on the way. But everything changed overnight because of one fateful decision. On a winter evening in 1961, a blizzard brewing, Nora goes into labor. Due to the weather, they could only make it to the clinic, not the hospital, and only Caroline, the nurse, arrived to help deliver the baby. David delivers his own child, a perfectly healthy son. But when Nora continues her labor, David realizes she is carrying twins; and the second child, a girl, is born with Down syndrome. Wanting to protect his wife from the devastating news, David gives the child to Caroline to take to an institution, asking her never to reveal the secret. Caroline takes the baby and disappears. 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."

The Washington Post

"Anyone would be struck by the extraordinary power and sympathy of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*."

Chicago Tribune

"Kim Edwards's stunning family drama evokes the spirit of Sue Miller and Alice Sebold, articulating every mother's silent fear: what would happen if you lost your child and she grew up without you? In 1964, when a blizzard forces Dr. David Henry to deliver his own twins, he immediately recognizes that one of them has Down Syndrome and makes a split-second decision that will haunt all their lives forever. He asks his nurse to take the baby away to an institution and to keep her birth a secret. Instead, she disappears into another city to raise the child as her own. Compulsively readable and deeply moving, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is an astonishing tale of redemptive love."

Questions for Discussion*:

1. When David decided to give his baby girl to Caroline and lie to his wife, what was your immediate reaction? Do you come to understand David's reasons for his actions throughout the course of the novel?
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. How did you feel about Caroline's decision to raise the baby on her own? Was this a believable decision? What would you have done?
4. 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 syndrome? How might each of their lives have been different if David had not handed Phoebe to Caroline that fateful day?
5. 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?
6. 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?
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8. Discuss the many moral issues that this book raises...
9. The *Publisher's Weekly* reviewer described the book as "...a little too moist with compassion". Did you feel this way as well? Why or Why not?

**Several Questions taken from Penguin Reader's Guides*

http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/memory_keeper.html 8/07/08

**Compiled by Marjorie Linko, Liberty Public Library - August 2008
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**