

Caboodles Book Club Kits

The Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards



Booklist Review 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. -- Carolyn Kubisz (BookList, 05-15-2005, p1634)

Publishers Weekly Review Edwards's 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. Agent, Geri Thoma . (July) --Staff (Reviewed May 16, 2005) (Publishers Weekly, vol 252, issue 20, p34)

Author Biography

"Kim Edwards grew up in Skaneateles, New York, in the heart of the Finger Lakes region. The oldest of four children, she graduated from Colgate University and the University of Iowa, where she received an MFA in Fiction and an MA in Linguistics. After completing her graduate work, she went with her husband to Asia, where they spent the next five years teaching, first on the rural east coast of Malaysia, then in a small city an hour south of Tokyo, and finally in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

During her time in Asia, Kim began to publish short fiction, and in 1990 her story "Sky Juice" won the Nelson Algren Award. Her stories and essays have since appeared in a wide range of periodicals, including *Ploughshares*, *Zoetrope*, *Anteaus*, *Story*, and *The Paris Review*. They have won many honors, including a National Magazine Award for Excellence in Fiction and a Pushcart Prize, as well as inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories*. Two of her stories have been performed at Symphony Space and broadcast on Public Radio International. Kim has also received support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kentucky Arts Council, among others. Her story collection *The Secrets of a Fire King* was short-listed for the 1998 Pen/Hemingway Award."

"Kim Edwards received a Whiting Writers' Award in 2002. She has taught in the MFA programs at Warren Wilson and Washington University, and is currently an assistant professor at The University of Kentucky. Her novel, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, was selected for a Barnes and Noble Discovery Award and won the Kentucky Literary Award for Fiction in 2005. *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, a #1 New York Times Best Seller in the United States, will also be published in Italy, Japan, Brazil, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Portugal, Spain, Poland, China, Taiwan, Israel, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

Source: "About Kim Edwards." *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*. Copyright 2006. Kim Edwards, Web. 19 Oct 2009. <http://www.memorykeepersdaughter.com/about_kim_edwards.html>.

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?

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