The Memory Keeper's Daughter
by Kim Edwards

About the book

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.

About the author

Kim Edwards is the author of a short story collection, The Secrets of a Fire King, which was an alternate for the 1998 PEN/Hemingway Award, and has won both a Whiting Award and the Nelson Algren Award. A graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she currently teaches writing at the University of Kentucky.
Discussion Questions

1. Who is "the memory keeper?" How do memories move the story along? What are the different ways characters deal with rememberance and memory?

2. What was your initial reaction when David gave Phoebe away? Could you sympathize with his decision? What caused him to give her up?

3. Why do you think Caroline decided to raise Phoebe on her own? Did she do the right thing?

4. The more time passed, the harder it became for David to tell Norah the truth about Phoebe. Did her reasons for not telling her change over time? Why don't you think he ever came clean? Did you want him to tell her? Would it have saved his marriage or destroyed it? How might it have affected Phoebe, Caroline and Al?

5. Do you think there is ever a circumstance when it is right to keep the truth from those you love?

6. Many people questioned whether Phoebe's life would be worth living (David Henry questioned it in giving her away, the nurse who asked Caroline whether she wanted to let her die after the bee sting, other parents who would see Caroline on the playground, etc.). Contrast Phoebe's life to Paul's. Who was happier? Who had more opportunities? Was one of their lives more worthwhile than the other? How do we determine what lives are worth living?

7. Who was at fault in David and Norah's marriage falling apart? Do you think their relationship would have survived if they had kept Phoebe or would raising her have caused a different kind of stress to isolate them?

8. Why do you think Caroline and Al were able to be happier than Norah and David?

9. Why does Caroline wait until David is dead to tell Norah the truth? Do you think she ever stopped loving him? Discuss the connection the shared.

10. Why does David take photographs? What do they represent? Can you sympathize with his desire to immortalize a moment?

11. Why does David feel comfortable telling Rosemary all his secrets? How does he change after meeting her?

12. Rate *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* on a scale of 1 to 5.