

# The Memory Keeper's Daughter: A Novel

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A #1 New York Times bestseller by Kim Edwards, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is a brilliantly crafted novel of parallel lives, familial secrets, and the redemptive power of love

Kim Edwards's stunning novel begins on a winter night in 1964 in Lexington, Kentucky, when a blizzard forces Dr. David Henry to deliver his own twins. His son, born first, is perfectly healthy, but the doctor immediately recognizes that his daughter has Down syndrome. Rationalizing it as a need to protect Norah, his wife, he makes a split second decision that will alter all of their lives forever. He asks his nurse, Caroline, to take the baby away to an institution and never to reveal the secret. Instead, she disappears into another city to raise the child herself. So begins this beautifully told story that unfolds over a quarter of a century—in which these two families, ignorant of each other, are yet bound by the fateful decision made that winter night long ago.

A family drama, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* explores every mother's silent fear: What would happen if you lost your child and she grew up without you? It is also an astonishing tale of love and how the mysterious ties that hold a family together help us survive the heartache that occurs when long-buried secrets are finally uncovered.

A READING GROUP GUIDE TO  
THE MEMORY KEEPER'S DAUGHTER  
Kim Edwards

1. *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is a powerful combination of a tragic and poignant family story as well as riveting page-turner, due primarily to the fact that it centers on such a shocking act by one individual that affects everyone he cares about. How did the idea for this novel come to you?

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. I was pleased that she'd thought of me, if a bit surprised. I was back in church after a 20-some year absence, and still quite skeptical of it all. Yet even to my critical eye it was clear that good things were happening: the congregation was vibrant and progressive and engaged; the co-pastors, a married couple who had both once been university professors, gave sermons that were beautifully crafted and thought-provoking, both intellectual and heartfelt. I'd already come to admire them very much. Still, it happens fairly often that people want to give me stories, and invariably those stories are not mine to tell. So I thanked my pastor, but didn't think much more about her offer.

The next week she stopped me again. I really have to tell you this story, she said, and she did. It was just a few sentences, about a man who'd discovered, late in life, that his brother had been born with Down's 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.

And I didn't, not for years. The idea stayed with me, however, as the necessary stories do. Eventually, in an unrelated moment, I was invited to do a writing workshop for adults with mental challenges through a Lexington group called Minds Wide Open. I was nervous about doing this, I have to confess. I didn't have much experience with people who have mental challenges, and I didn't have any idea of what to expect. As it turned out, we had a wonderful morning, full of expression and surprises and some very fine poetry. At the end of the class, several of the participants hugged me as they left.

This encounter made a deep impression on me, and I found myself thinking of this novel idea again, with a greater sense of urgency and interest. Still, it was another year before I started to write it. Then the first chapter came swiftly, almost fully formed, that initial seed having grown tall while I wasn't really paying attention. In her Paris Review interview, Katherine Anne Porter talks about the event of a story being like a stone thrown in water—she says it's not the event itself that's interesting, but rather the ripples the event creates in the lives of characters. I found this to be true. Once I'd written the first chapter, I wanted to find out more about who these people were and what happened to them as a consequence of David's decision; I couldn't stop until I knew.

2. Human motivation, the simple question of why we do what we do, is often very complex, as it is here with David and his fateful decision. As his creator, were you able to sympathize in any way with his motives?

Oh, yes, certainly. Even though none of us may never experience a moment this dramatic, nonetheless we all have similar experiences, times when we react powerfully to an event in ways we may not completely understand until much later, if at all.

I knew from the beginning that David wasn't an evil person. He makes absolutely the wrong decision in that first chapter, but even so he acts out of what he believes are good intentions—the desire to protect Norah from grief, and even the desire to do what the medical community in that time and place had deemed best for a child with Down's Syndrome.

There's much more to this, of course. David's own grief at the loss of his sister is something he's never confronted, never resolved. I don't think this was unusual in that era. Grief counselors, after all, are relatively new. I remember stories, growing up, of adults in my town who had suffered terrible losses. There was a kind of silence around such people. Everyone knew their history, and the imprint of the loss was visible in the unfolding of their lives, but no one ever mentioned the person who had died.

So it was with David. His way of coping with the loss of his sister, and with the greater loss of his family that resulted, was to try to move on; to take control of his life and to push forward; to become a success in the eyes of the world. Yet even so, his grief was never far below the surface, and when Phoebe was born with Down's Syndrome, an event he could

not anticipate or control, his old grief welled up. David's response in that moment is as much to the past as to the present, but it takes him decades, and a trip back to the place where he grew up, to understand this.

3. The novel begins in 1964. Do you think our attitudes toward people with disabilities have changed since then? Are we more enlightened or accepting now?

Yes, things have changed for the better over the past decades, but I'd say also that it's an ongoing process, with much more progress yet to be made.

Certainly, writing this novel was a process of enlightenment for me. When I began this book, I didn't know how to imagine Phoebe. I was compelled by the secret and its impact on the family, but I wasn't very knowledgeable about Down's Syndrome. To create a convincing character, one who was herself and not a stereotype, without being either sentimental or patronizing, seemed a daunting task.

I started reading and researching. Also, tentatively, I started having conversations. The first couple I spoke with has a daughter whom they'd raised during the time period of this book. They were a terrific help, candid and straightforward and wise. When I showed them the opening chapter, their immediate response was that I'd gotten the doctor exactly right: the attitudes David has about Down's Syndrome may seem outrageous to us now, but there was a time, not all that long ago, when these ideas were widely held.

The reason attitudes have changed, quite simply, is because the parents of children with Down's Syndrome refused, as Caroline does in this novel, to accept imposed limitations for their children. The fight that Caroline fights during this book is emblematic of struggles that took place all over the country during this era to change prevailing attitudes and to open doors that had been slammed shut.

The changes did not and do not happen easily, or without personal costs for those who struggled and struggle still to make their children visible to the world. Time and again as I researched this book I heard stories of both heartbreak and great courage. Time and again, also, I was impressed with the expansive generosity of people with Down's Syndrome and their families, who met with me, shared their life journeys and perceptions, their joys and struggles, and were eager to help me learn. Many of them have read the book and loved it, which for me is a profound measure of its success.

4. Your use of photography as a metaphor throughout the book is artfully done. Do you have a personal interest in photography, or did you educate yourself about it as part of the writing process?

I'm not a photographer, but for several years in college I was very good friends with people who were, some of whom, in fact, had darkrooms set up in their houses. Photography was woven into many of our conversations, and I sometimes went with my friends when they were seeking particular shots. I wasn't at all interested in the mechanics—apertures and f-stops left me cold—but I was always fascinated by the

photographs appearing in the developer, what was invisible coaxed into image by the chemical bath. It's a slow emergence, a kind of birth, really; a moment of mystery. I was intrigued by the use of light, as well, the way too much light will erase an image on both film and paper.

I also remember being annoyed, more than once, when my friends' need to get a photo right interfered with the moment the photo was meant to capture: at a family reunion, for instance, or a birthday party. How did the presence of the photographer change the nature of the moment? What was gained and what was lost by having the eye of the camera present?

During the very early stages of writing this novel, I read a New Yorker essay about the photographer Walker Evans that discussed many of these questions quite eloquently, reminding me of my photographer friends. Norah gave David a camera, and from there I started doing quite a lot of research. Amid many other explorations, I spent time at Eastman Kodak Museum in Rochester and read Susan Sontag's fascinating and inspiring *On Photography*.

5. The city of Pittsburgh figures quite prominently in the story and is described in very affectionate terms. ("The city of Pittsburgh gleaming suddenly before her . . . so startling in its vastness and its beauty that she had gasped and slowed, afraid of losing control of the car" p. 91.) This is not a city that usually captures the imagination nor has it been a common setting for novels. Would you talk a bit about why you chose Pittsburgh and your personal connection, if any, to it?

I moved to Pittsburgh sight unseen; my husband and I were teaching in Cambodia when he was accepted into a Ph.D. program at The University of Pittsburgh. This was before e-mail; there were no telephones in Phnom Penh, and even electricity was often sporadic. With no clear image of Pittsburgh, we agreed to move there, visions of steel smoke and gritty industrialism hanging like a shadow when he sent in his acceptance.

Caroline's experience crossing the Fort Pitt bridge is my own. It's a spectacular moment: one emerges from the endless Fort Pitt tunnel onto a bridge spanning the Monongahela River, just before it merges with the Allegheny River and forms the Ohio River. Water gleams everywhere, and the buildings of the city narrow to the point between the rivers, and in the middle distance the greening hills rise up, studded with houses. The director of the MFA program at the University of Pittsburgh once confided to me how much he liked to drive visitors in from the airport, because they were invariably astonished by this view.

I spent four years in Pittsburgh and would have happily stayed there had circumstances allowed. It's a fascinating city, rich with history and parks. It's wonderful city for walking, too, with beautiful old neighborhoods and places where you find yourself suddenly

standing on a bluff again, gazing out over the ever-changing rivers.

6. The Memory Keeper's Daughter, while ultimately redemptive and hopeful, reveals much of the dark side of the human experience. Actors often talk about how working on a very painful role can affect their psyche; others speak of being able simply to let it go and not have the work affect their daily lives. As a writer, how does working on such a heart-wrenching story affect your own state of mind? When you stop writing, are you able to let it go?

Well, they all struggle, don't they? They walk through a lot darkness. Yet I never found writing this book painful. In part, I think, I identified with all the characters in this book: the one who keeps a secret and the one from whom secrets have been kept; the parent who longs for a child and the child who longs for harmony and wholeness; the wanderer and the one who stays in place. I recognized their journeys of self-discovery, in any case. I was interested in them, and I wanted to know what happened to them, and who they were. The only way to discover all that was to write the book. Also, because the novel is told through four different points of view, moving from one character's mind to another, I was able step back from one point of view and work on another whenever I was stuck. This was very liberating, and allowed me to attain a certain level of detachment from one character while working on another.

7. As an award-winning short story writer, you are best known for your critically acclaimed collection *The Secrets of a Fire King*. Would you talk a bit about how you came to write a novel, and the difference between working on a novel and a short story?

When my story collection was published, several reviewers remarked that each one contained the scope of a novel. That interested me, because the stories always felt like stories; I couldn't imagine them being a word longer than they were. Likewise, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* was a novel from the moment I started writing. Yet despite the difference in complexity and length, writing a novel was very much like writing stories. There's a bigger canvas in a novel, and thus more room to explore, but it's still a process of discovery, a leap into the unknown, and an intuitive seeking of the next moment, and the next. For me, writing is never linear, though I do believe quite ardently in revision. I think of revision as a kind of archeology, a deep exploration of the text to discover what's still hidden and bring it to the surface.

8. Who are some of your favorite authors, and what are you currently reading?

I read a great deal. Alice Munro and William Trevor are authors whose work I return to again and again. I have just finished Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and I will read it again soon simply to savor the beauty of the language. New books by both Ursula Hegi and Sue Monk Kidd are on my desk, along with the poems of Pablo Neruda. During the writing of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* I returned to classic novels with secrets at their center, especially Dostoevsky's extraordinary *Crime and Punishment* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. I'm also midway through Thomas Mann's quartet of novels based on the story of Joseph and his brothers; these archetypal stories are informing the next novel I

plan to write, as well.

9. What are you working on now?

I have begun a new novel, called *The Dream Master*. 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.

questions for discussion

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, Carol...  
"A gripping novel, beautifully written. With amazing compassion, Kim Edwards explores the impact of a family secret that challenges the limits of love and redemption."

--Ursula Hegi

"The Memory Keeper's Daughter is a gift, filled with radiant mystery. Kim Edwards writes with great wisdom and compassion about family, choices, secrets, and redemption. This is a wonderful heartbreaking, heart-healing novel."

--Luanne Rice

"Kim Edwards has written a novel so mesmerizing that I devoured it in a single gulp, reading far into the wee hours. Her characters will hold you spellbound as you watch a marriage founded on the sweetest of intimacies destroyed by unexamined concepts of conventional wisdom, by lies and by secrecy. From the ashes grow new lives strong enough to defy convention and to define family simply as supportive love. Terror, pity, redemption--what reader can ask for more? This beautifully written novel *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* has it all."

--Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *FOUR SPIRITS* and *AHAB'S WIFE*

"This unusual novel is exciting, probing, dashing, and filled with surprises. The writing is memorable and smart. A keeper!"

--Bobbie Ann Mason

Other Books

The Memory Keeper's Image Guide. This is an explanation of the Memory Keeper's Watch book, as well as additional exercises to test the memory.

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