

The Memory Keeper's Daughter

by Kim Edwards

About the Book

This stunning novel begins on a winter night in 1964, 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's syndrome. For motives he tells himself are good, he makes a split-second decision that will haunt all their lives forever. He asks his nurse, Caroline, to take the baby away to an institution. Instead, she disappears into another city to raise the child as her own. Compulsively readable and deeply moving, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is a brilliantly crafted story of parallel lives, familial secrets, and the redemptive power of love.

Praise for the Book

"Absolutely mesmerizing."

— **Sue Monk Kidd**

"In *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, Kim Edwards has created a tale of regret and redemption . . . of characters haunted by their past. Crafted with language so lovely you have to reread the passages just to be captivated all over again . . . simply a beautiful book."

— **Jodi Picoult**

"Kim Edwards writes with great wisdom and compassion. . . . This is a wonderful, heartbreaking, heart-healing novel."

— **Luanne Rice**

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

— **The Washington Post**

"Kim Edwards has written a novel so mesmerizing that I devoured it."

— **Sena Jeter Naslund**

"Edwards is a born novelist. . . . *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is rich with psychological detail and the nuances of human connection."

— **Chicago Tribune**

Courtesy of Penguin Books

About the Author

Kim Edwards

American writer (1958–)

Updated: 08/21/2007

Personal Information: Born May 4, 1958, in Killeen, TX; married Thomas Clayton, 1987; children: two daughters.

Education: Attended Auburn Community College; Colgate University, B.A., 1981; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1983, M.A., 1987.

Addresses: Home: Lexington, KY. Office: University of Kentucky, Department of English, 1215 Patterson Office Tower, Lexington, KY 40506-0027.

E-mail: Edwards@uky.edu.

Career: Writer, novelist, short-story writer, and educator. University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, visiting professor, 2003, currently assistant professor. Taught in M.F.A. programs at Washington University and Warren Wilson College; spent five years teaching in Malaysia, Japan, and Cambodia.

Awards: Pushcart Prize, for short story “The Way It Felt to Be Falling”; PEN/Hemingway Award finalist, for *The Secrets of a Fire King*; National Magazine Award for Excellence in Fiction; Nelson Algren Award, 1990, for short story “Sky Juice”; Whiting Writer’s Award, 2000; Kentucky Literary Award for Fiction, 2005, and Barnes and Noble Discovery Award, both for *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*; recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Seaside Institute, Kentucky Arts Council, and Kentucky Foundation for Women.

WRITINGS

- *The Secrets of a Fire King* (short stories), W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 1997.
- *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* (novel), Viking (New York, NY), 2005.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Paris Review*, *Redbook*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *North American Review*, *Iowa Woman*, *Threepenny Review*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Ploughshares*, *Anteaus*, *Story*, and *Zoetrope*. Author’s stories have been performed at Symphony Space and broadcast on Public Radio International.

Author’s works have been translated into more than fourteen languages.

Media Adaptations: *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* has been optioned for a TV film by Lifetime and Jaffe-Braunstein Films.

Sidelights

Writer and educator Kim Edwards has published many short stories in journals that include the *Paris Review*, *Redbook*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Ploughshares*. She wrote her first short story in a fiction workshop while a student at Colgate University. “The Way It Felt to Be Falling,” originally published in *Threepenny Review*, won the Pushcart Prize

and is included in Edwards's first book, *The Secrets of a Fire King*. "Writing is always a process of discovery — I never know the end, or even the events on the next page, until they happen. There's a constant interplay between the imagining and shaping of the story," Edwards remarked on the *Memory Keeper's Daughter* Web site.

The Secrets of a Fire King, which Nina Sonenberg in the *New York Times Book Review* deemed an "accomplished" debut, presents stories that deal with a wide range of themes and settings. Many refer to Asia, where Edwards spent five years traveling and teaching. In "Spring, Mountain, Sea," for example, a U.S. soldier's Asian bride learns about American foods and customs from the couple's neighbors, but their response to her gift of gratitude turns her away from the American culture. In "Gold," a young man's life is affected when gold is discovered in his Malaysian village, while "The Way It Felt to Be Falling" tells how a young woman learns about her inner strength when she suddenly decides to attempt a sky dive with a friend. *Chicago Tribune Books* contributor Patricia Lear described this story as sophisticated and brilliantly constructed. "The stories are impeccable, a treasure," wrote Lear, who observed that each piece "possesses the breadth of a novel." In the *Hudson Review*, critic Tom Wilhelmus wrote: "Rich in detail and at home with abstract ideas, Kim Edwards' stories mark an impressive beginning for a talented new storyteller."

The Memory Keeper's Daughter is Edwards's debut novel. Protagonist David Henry is a physician who overcame a difficult, impoverished background in West Virginia to become a successful orthopedic surgeon. Years later, he is still haunted by the travails of his sister, June, whose fragile health kept the family in a constant state of stress and who died of a heart condition at age twelve. At the beginning of the book, in 1964, David's life is as good as he could hope. His practice is thriving, he is married to Norah, a beautiful woman he loves very much, and the two have a child on the way. When Norah goes into labor, a harsh blizzard is threatening the Lexington, Kentucky, area, and David and Norah can only make it to the clinic, not the hospital. There, with the assistance of his nurse, Caroline, David delivers the couple's offspring. To his surprise, Norah is carrying twins. The first child, Paul, is a perfectly healthy boy. However, the second child, Phoebe, is born with Down Syndrome. Wracked with indecision, and still keenly remembering the difficulties surrounding his sister's short life, he finally asks Caroline to take Phoebe away and commit her to an institution. His intention is to save his wife and family the disrupting, draining stress caused by perpetually ill child. He tells Norah that the girl was stillborn. Caroline, unable to abandon the infant girl, instead disappears, taking Phoebe to raise as her own.

As the next twenty-five years unfold within the novel, Edwards examines the effects of these events on the two families. David struggles with the guilt of his lie and with the fact that he abandoned his daughter, the secret of her existence always looming large in the background. Norah experiences the keen grief of a mother who has lost a child. The couple's marriage deteriorates, and the family fails to come together as a whole, always driven apart by the unseen but deeply felt rift caused by Phoebe's "death." Paul grows up feeling guilt of his own at having survived, and wonders often about his lost sister. Though he had hoped for the best, David's decision brought down years of trouble on his

family. Phoebe, on the other hand, living in Pittsburgh, grows happily and thrives under Caroline's love and dedicated care. For her part, Caroline's life takes an upward path, and she prospers personally and professionally. Phoebe matures into a vibrant and capable young woman, nourished by love and by Caroline's steadfast devotion. "This is what drives the story — as one family thrives, the other one deteriorates," observed by Marie Hashima Lofton on *Bookreporter.com*.

Edwards "has written a heart-wrenching book, by turns light and dark, literary and suspenseful," commented Keddy Ann Outlaw, writing in *Library Journal*. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer concluded that "this neatly structured story is a little too moist with compassion." With this novel, "Edwards tells a moving story," commented Carolyn Kubisz in *Booklist*.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2005, Carolyn Kubisz, review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, p. 1634.
- *Bookseller*, August 4, 2006, "Viking Wins US Bestseller," p. 11.
- *Daily Variety*, January 15, 2007, John Dempsey, "A 'Keeper' for Lifetime," p. 3.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, August 18, 2006, "The Charts," review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, p. 143.
- *Hudson Review*, autumn, 1997, Tom Wilhelmus, review of *The Secrets of a Fire King*, p. 527.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 15, 2005, review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, p. 437.
- *Library Journal*, April 15, 1997, Ellen R. Cohen, review of *The Secrets of a Fire King*, p. 122; July 1, 2005, Keddy Ann Outlaw, review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, p. 66.
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 20, 1997, Nina Sonenberg, review of *The Secrets of a Fire King*, p. 20.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 24, 1997, review of *The Secrets of a Fire King*, p. 64; May 15, 2005, review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, p. 34.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), June 1, 1997, Patricia Lear, "Getting it Right," p. 4.

ONLINE

- *Blogcritics*, <http://www.blogcritics.org/> (February 24, 2007), Ginger Haycox, review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*.
- *BookBrowse*, <http://www.bookbrowse.com/> (April 10, 2007), interview with Kim Edwards.
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (April 10, 2007), Marie Hashima Lofton, review of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*.
- *Memory Keeper's Daughter Web site*, <http://www.memorykeepersdaughter.com> (April 10, 2007).

- *W.W. Norton Web site*, <http://www.wwnorton.com/> (April 10, 2007), description of *The Secrets of a Fire King*.
- *Zoetrope: All-Story*, <http://www.all-story.com/> (April 10, 2007), “Kim Edwards.”

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2007

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q. *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?

Kim Edwards: 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 twenty-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 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.

Q. 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?

KE: Oh, yes, certainly. Even though none of us may ever 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 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 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.

Q. 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?

KE: 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 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 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 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 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.

Q. 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?

KE: 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*.

Q. 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?

KE: 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 Monogahela 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 a 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.

Q. *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?

KE: Well, the characters all struggle, don’t they? They walk through a lot of darkness. Yet I never found writing this book painful. In part, I think, because 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.

Q. 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?

KE: 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.

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

KE: 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.

Q. What are you working on now?

KE: 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.

Courtesy of Penguin Books

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?

Courtesy of Penguin Books