

Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



In a tale spanning twenty-five years, a doctor delivers his newborn twins during a snowstorm and, rashly deciding to protect his wife from their baby daughter's affliction with Down Syndrome, turns her over to a nurse, who secretly raises the child.

About the Author *Source:*

http://www.memorykeepersdaughter.com/about_kim_edwards.html



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.

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.

Reviews

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.

Publishers Weekly:

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.

Library Journal *Starred Review*

During a blizzard in 1964, Norah Henry gives birth to twins. Owing to the storm, her husband, Dr. David Henry, delivers the babies--one a boy, the other a girl who clearly has Down syndrome. David decides to send the daughter, Phoebe, to an institution, telling his wife the infant died. There is a catch, however: the nurse entrusted with the errand cannot bear to give Phoebe away. Norah pours her soul into raising her son but forever mourns the loss of her daughter; Phoebe, meanwhile, thrives under the loving care of her accidental mother, and the secret of her existence creates an impenetrable wall between David and Norah Henry. First-time novelist Edwards - author of the short story collection *The Secrets of a Fire King* - has written a heart-wrenching book, by turns light and dark, literary and suspenseful. A natural for book discussion groups; recommended.

Kirkus Reviews

One well-intentioned lie causes deep fissures in a family.

David Henry had a hard childhood in West Virginia. His family was dirt poor and his sister June, always sickly, died of a heart defect at 12. Vowing to do good, David left home to become an orthopedic surgeon in Lexington, Ky. He's 33 when he meets Norah Asher in a department store. The year is 1964, and it's love at first sight. David delivers his and Norah's own twins—a boy (Paul) who's fine, and a girl (Phoebe) who is damaged with Down's syndrome. Hoping to spare her the pain he underwent with his sister, David tells Norah that the girl is stillborn and instructs his nurse, Caroline, to deliver the infant to an institution. Secretly in love with David, Caroline, who is shocked by his subterfuge and shocked again by the grim shelter, decides to move away and raise Phoebe on her own. Over the next 25 years, parallel stories unfold. In Lexington, the loss of the supposedly dead baby corrodes David and Norah's marriage. Neither they nor son Paul can be warmed by life together, each keeping busy with pet projects. In Pittsburgh, meanwhile, Caroline lands on her feet, securing a good job and a good man, and raising Phoebe with a fierce devotion. Unfortunately, after its fast and sure-footed start, the story sags: Edwards insists heavy-handedly on the consequences of David's lie but fails to deliver any true catharsis, and when David does confess, it's not to Norah. Visiting his childhood home, he is surprised by a squatter, a pregnant runaway of 16 who ties him up—and his story tumbles out. It's a bold scene, rekindling the excitement of the start yet remaining a solitary flash in a humdrum progression. When the family finally learns the truth, the impact is minimal.

First-novelist Edwards (stories: *The Secrets of a Fire King*, 1997) excels at celebrating a quiet wholesomeness but stumbles over her storyline.

Discussion Questions *Source:*

http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/memory_keeper.html

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 syndrome? How might each of their lives have been different if David had not handed Phoebe to Caroline that fateful day?

Multimedia

The Memory Keeper's Daughter (Movie)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1326192>

(Call number: DVD Drama Memory)

A father has a nurse take his newborn daughter to a home to be raised away from his wife and the baby's twin brother, upon learning that the baby girl has Down Syndrome.

Further Reading

The Lake of Dreams by Kim Edwards

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1376410>

(Call number: Fiction Edwards)

In this book, the author tells the story of a woman's homecoming, a family secret, and the old house that holds the key to the true legacy of a family. At a crossroads in her life, Lucy Jarrett returns home from Japan, only to find herself haunted by her father's unresolved death a decade ago.

The Secrets of a Fire King by Kim Edwards

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1291921>

(Call number: Fiction Edwards)

A collection of stories featuring strong women.

Official website

<http://www.memorykeepersdaughter.com/>

The official Web site for *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, a bestselling novel about parallel lives, familial secrets, and the redemptive power of love.

Read-Alikes *Source: NoveList*

The Vagabonds by Nicholas Delbanco

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1228815>

(Call number: Fiction Delbanco)

The critically acclaimed author ("*Old Score*") returns with a sweeping family saga that delves into the nature of inheritance and the effect it has on one American family.

Mourning Ruby by Helen Dunmore

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1383434>

(Call number: Fiction Dunmore)

From the Orange Prize Award-winning author of "*Ice Cream*" comes her most ambitious novel to date, an intensely moving and strongly plotted tale about love, loss, and mourning--a novel which opens to reveal a brilliant richness of stories locked within it.

Evening News by Marly Swick

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146925>

(Call number: Fiction Swick)

Nine year-old Teddy is playing next door with his best friend when Eric pulls out his father's handgun and hands it to Teddy. The telephone rings; the gun goes off, shooting -- and killing -- Teddy's two-year-old half-sister Trina, who was playing in a wading pool in the yard outside, with Giselle, their mother, by her side. Thus begins Marly Swick's second novel after the highly acclaimed "*Paper Wings*." As with her previous work, Swick resolutely travels the domestic landscape, detailing delicately and truthfully the effect of Trina's death on the unstable triangle of the family left behind. Each member finds their bonds of love and loyalty tested, and each is resilient in the face of their loss, but for different -- perhaps too different -- reasons: Giselle must get Teddy through the crisis, but Dan, his stepfather, having just lost his daughter, has no such responsibility.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

