The Memory Keeper’s Daughter
by Kim Edwards

The year is 1964. David Henry is a happily married orthopedic surgeon. When his wife, Norah, goes into labor in the middle of a snowstorm, David realizes that the birth will have to take place in his own office instead of at the hospital as planned. Unbeknownst to the couple, Norah is carrying twins, a boy and a girl. When David delivers the second baby, he is hypnotized by the “unmistakable features, the eyes turned up as if with laughter, the epicanthal fold across their lids, the flattened nose” (16), “the gap between her big toes and the others, […] Brushfield spots, as tiny and distinct as flecks of snow in the irises”.

David, unable to bear the idea of causing his wife the pain that he knows comes with a Down’s syndrome child, asks his nurse Caroline to bring the girl to a home and then tells Norah that the baby died. After seeing the conditions at the “home for the feebbleminded,” Caroline cannot bear to leave the baby there. She leaves town determined to raise the child on her own.

So the twins begin their lives, separated at birth. So also begins a quarter century of secret keeping and hidden loss. Phoebe is raised lovingly by Caroline, who must struggle against societal prejudices in order to give Phoebe the same opportunities as other children, while Paul grows up in a household filled with unexplained tension, ever touched by the shadow of the sister he never knew.

A powerful novel, The Memory Keeper’s Daughter is both an exploration of grief and loss and a meditation on the power of love. Most importantly, though, it is a study of humanity.
One of the author’s gifts, it seems, is in characterization. The parental figures in the novel, in particular, are very sympathetic. While reading the novel, these characters are as real to the reader as his next-door neighbors.

The novel’s title refers to the present Norah gives David for their anniversary, a camera called “the Memory Keeper.” More than a camera, her gift is a hobby intended to assuage David’s workaholism, the most visible sign of the problems in his marriage. Photography, however, becomes an obsession for David:

He saw he’d been caught, frozen for all these years in that moment when he handed Caroline his daughter. His life turned around that single action: a newborn child in his arms—and then he reached out to give her away. It was as if he’d taken pictures all these years since to try and give another moment similar substance, equal weight. He’d wanted to try and still the rushing world, the flow of events, but of course that had been impossible. Photography also becomes an overriding and multifaceted theme in the novel. Edwards uses the language and act of photography as well as photographic imagery to illuminate many aspects of her ambitious first novel.

Despite being a profoundly moving novel, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* has a few obvious flaws. The first lies in the frequent reminders of the pivotal moment. The second is that both Norah and David at one point or another do things that seem completely out of character. The third, somewhat-less-obvious flaw appears in novel’s middle section. In order to cover the twenty-five year timespan of her intended story, the author begins to gloss over things. Years in the lives of her characters are summed up in only a few big ticket events. This is deeply unsatisfying for the reader, because it is precisely in the small, quiet moments of everyday life shown in the beginning and end of the book that Edwards is able to truly illuminate her characters and their story.

Although *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is her first novel, Edwards has already had much literary success. Her short story collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King* was shortlisted for the PEN/Hemingway Award. She is also the recipient of numerous other awards, including the Whiting Award, the National Magazine Award for Fiction, and the Nelson Algren Award. Edwards teaches writing at the University of Kentucky.

Sure to engender much discussion, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* would be a perfect selection for a book club.
Kim Edwards was born in Killeen, Texas. She grew up in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York and attended Colgate University and The University of Iowa, where she earned an MFA in fiction and an MA in linguistics. She is the author of The Secrets of a Fire King, which was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and her stories have been published in The Paris Review, Story, Ploughshares, Zoetrope, and many other periodicals. She has received many awards for the short story, including a Pushcart Prize, the National Magazine Award, the Nelson Algren Award, and inclusion in The Best American Short Stories of 1993. Two of her stories were performed at Symphony Space and broadcast on ‘Selected Shorts.’ Kim Edwards received a Whiting Writers’ Award, as well as grants from the Pennsylvania and Kentucky Arts Councils, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and the National Endowment for the Arts.
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?