



# NEWBORN, DREAMLAND

*Twin sisters Kelley Ryden & Tracy Raver  
and their business of bliss* by Stephanie Boozer

There's no denying that even to those of us with siblings, twin-hood holds a special kind of mystique. We suppose that twins are intimately attuned to each other's moods and subtlest body language, and we wonder what that's like. Twins Kelley Ryden and Tracy Raver would appear to be such a duo, though each of them is so practical and matter-of-fact about it as to demystify their connection as anything but close sisters. Both are photographers in their own right; when they work together in newborn portrait sessions, their quiet alchemy leads to magical results.

Based in Omaha, Nebraska, Kelley and Tracy have been in photography for 10 years, the last 8 of which almost exclusively with sleepy little newborns in intricately styled newborn portraiture. Kelley and Tracy are much sought after by clients and photographers alike for their natural way with wee ones. "We just know babies," says Tracy, who does the lion's share of the styling and baby whispering in sessions, while Kelley works the camera. "Our true passion is newborns. We're completely obsessed with that next session. We've spent so many years learning how to calm those little people and get them at a good comfort level. It's what we're good at."

When their work appeared online in the U.K.'s Daily Mail a few years ago, it put them on the radar of "The Today Show," and then came contracts for photo books and calendars. Their popularity established, Kelley and Tracy created a workshop and international mentoring program for other photographers, titled "Newborn Dreamland." Ready to slow the dizzying pace of teaching as well as photographing for clients, this year they're ready to focus more fully on their first love, cozing up with teeny babes in studio portrait sessions.



**Photos by Kelley Ryden  
& Tracy Raver**

See more of Kelley and Tracy's work at  
[newborndreamland.com](http://newborndreamland.com).



**Immerse yourself in the physical language of newborns.** Kelley and Tracy are both parents, but they say it's the time they've spent with other people's babies that's made them experts in handling newborns. Even though every baby is unique and special, says Kelley, there are definitely universal cues and signals to look for as each session unfolds. For one, you welcome the sound of baby's deep breathing, as it means he's comfortable enough to snooze soundly as you bring the camera in close. And the moment you see the bundle start to wiggle, deploy your best baby-soothing tactics before the situation escalates.

"I'm always one step ahead of that newborn," says Kelley, whose second career choice would be labor and delivery nurse. "I'm able to read the signs. The tightening of the mid-section, the forehead, all the little sounds they make. Every single one of them comes out having those instincts. So you have to stay ahead of them to keep the session calm and relaxed. If you don't practice it every week, it's not that easy!"

If the session is to be successful, you've got to first address the newborn's most basic needs: a full tummy and a really warm environment, she says. Then, the more adept and authoritative you are at soothing and comforting the baby, the smoother the session will go, and the happier the clients. Kelley keeps her sessions so calm that parents easily nod off themselves. "I want my clients just as calm as that baby," she says. "I make everyone sleep in my studio."

**Light and color.** Newborns come in an array of skin tones, so develop an eye and be ready to adjust your camera settings accordingly, says Kelley. With the reds, blues and yellow hues of the skin, it's far easier and more efficient to nail your settings in-camera than in post-processing. Kelley's eye for those nuances in tone now guide her seamlessly in choosing shutter speed, ISO and white balance. Though the sisters shoot in a studio, they take advantage of the natural western light streaming through a floor-to-almost-ceiling window. Kelley usually schedules newborns in the morning, when the light is a little cool, but not as blue as early morning. (The light reddens as the sun begins its downward arc.) "I just don't like studio light," says Kelley. "There's nothing wrong with it and I've shot with it at other studios, but it's not my preference. I can't get the color just how I want it. Creating a shallow depth of field is harder to do with studio light. Natural light makes you think, 'What's the color of the light right now? What do I need to do?'"

**Master technique, find your style.** As with any other portraiture, mastering newborn portraits starts with thorough technical knowledge. You just can't fudge it when you're working for clients. "Photographers may be drawn to other people's work and want to recreate it," says Kelley. "That's fine — it's how you learn and grow. But once you have that foundation, you have to pull everything together, technically and artistically, to find your style. Look at images, your own and other people's, and figure out what stops you, why you want to look at it, what grabs your attention. Then take that to create your style and make images that make you happy."