# The Trauma Cleaner by Sarah Krasnostein

## Synopsis

Before she was a trauma cleaner, Sandra Pankhurst was many things: husband and father, drag queen, gender reassignment patient, sex worker, small businesswoman, trophy wife…

But as a little boy, raised in violence and excluded from the family home, she just wanted to belong. Now she believes her clients deserve no less.

A woman who sleeps among garbage she has not put out for forty years. A man who bled quietly to death in his lounge room. A woman who lives with rats, random debris and terrified delusion. The still life of a home vacated by accidental overdose.

Sarah Krasnostein has watched the extraordinary Sandra Pankhurst bring order and care to these, the living and the dead—and the book she has written is equally extraordinary. Not just the compelling story of a fascinating life among lives of desperation, but an affirmation that, as isolated as we may feel, we are all in this together.

## Discussion questions

1. Order and proportion can be ‘an act of willful seeing, a conscious choice about perspective’ (255). Explore what this statement might mean. How much can we control our perspective on trauma?
2. Krasnostein describes her own book as an act of trauma cleaning: ‘reuniting fragments scattered by chaos to create heat and light. We cannot always eliminate what is bad or broken or lost but we can do our best to put everything in its place’ (6). In what ways do you see this book as being like trauma cleaning? Is it successful in creating order?
3. Do you think Krasnostein has the ‘right’ to Sandra’s story? What about the stories of Sandra’s clients?
4. Does Krasnostein’s personal experience of trauma and her telling of it add to Sandra’s story or subtract from it? When Sandra’s decision not to change her will to include her newly rediscovered sons sparks anger in Krasnostein, was she able to be an ‘impartial’ narrator? Is such a narrator desirable?
5. Did you ever feel uncomfortably voyeuristic about reading the stories of Sandra’s clients? How does reading this book compare to watching reality TV shows about hoarders?
6. In describing a client, Krasnostein writes: ‘As a person, Janice is of course more than her house; but is also true that her house is an indicator of what it feels to be Janice’ (140). Can you understand the impulse to hoard? Do you think hoarding is always an indicator of trauma?
7. Krasnostein acknowledges that she is ‘not sure I will ever be able to tell you exactly how Sandra has made it through’ (233). Why do you think she has? How well has she made it through?

 *Synopsis/Discussion questions from https://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/the-trauma-cleaner-one-woman-s-extraordinary-life-in-death-decay-disaster*