

The Trauma Cleaner

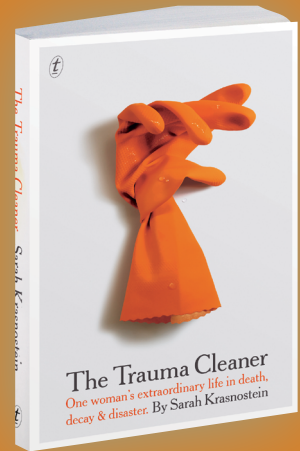
One Woman's Extraordinary life in Death, Decay & Disaster



Sarah Krasnostein

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Praise for Sarah Krasnostein and *The Trauma Cleaner*

'Krasnostein's playful yet heartfelt debut is one of the most arresting works of biography you will read in a long time.' *The Guardian*

'Krasnostein is an astute observer of human nature and her understated yet elegant prose is reminiscent of Helen Garner.' *Readings*

'[Sandra] is one of the most extraordinary characters you will ever find in a work of non-fiction...*The Trauma Cleaner* is a disturbing and fascinating read with a heavy, beating heart at its centre...[Krasnostein] shows how a writer can empathise and engage with a subject yet still paint a realistic portrait.' *Australian*

'An anomalous, indelible treasure...Krasnostein allows Sandra's story room to breathe and expand, to quietly but confidently stake its claim to the reader's heart.' *Kill Your Darlings*

'Krasnostein creates a humane portrait of a woman who has somehow found fertile ground in the mess of life. A brutal, heartbreaking and utterly moving story of survival – and a quiet kind of triumph.' *Better Reading*

'Compelling reading...This book reads like an unabashed love letter to Pankhurst with the first-time author, embedded for years in her subject's life, effusive in her adoration.' *Courier-Mail*

'This is a book which resists the temptation to fill in the gaps. In that sense, it enacts trauma itself. Krasnostein doesn't try and insist that all the details of these complex lives add up – she merely describes them vividly, lovingly and respectfully to make a single statement: this is a life.' *Judges' Report, Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, 2018*

'A wondrous portrait of an inspiring character.' *Saturday Paper*

About Sarah Krasnostein

Sarah Krasnostein was born in America, studied in Melbourne and has lived and worked in both countries. She is a law lecturer and researcher with a doctorate in criminal law. Her first book, *The Trauma Cleaner*, won the Victorian Prize for Literature and the Prize for Non-Fiction in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards 2018. Sarah lives in Melbourne and spends part of the year working in New York City.

A reader's introduction to *The Trauma Cleaner*

Sandra Pankhurst is the vital centre of this remarkable book. The trauma cleaner of the title has experienced her own traumas of many different kinds. Now she supports other people whose traumas—many of them the 'same sorrows' (3) Sandra has experienced—manifest in their inability to keep their houses in order, whether through lack of cleaning, hoarding, or (usually) both.

Sarah Krasnostein tracks the traumas Sandra has experienced, not just narrating them, but also trying to trace their effects. How has she been marked by trauma, and how has she managed to keep going in the face of it? Why is she so determined to do her absolute best in her job, including supporting her clients emotionally? How can she find such compassion for her clients? How do these qualities exist in someone who is unable, in her own words, to 'connect to people on [a] personal level' (234)?

And of course, we meet the clients. Kim, the artist who literally creates art from her trauma. Shane the sex offender whose threatening presence doesn't obscure the 'shape of the boy that he was' (168). Marilyn the former school teacher whose cancer may be a reason or a cover for her neglect of herself and her house.

‘By making a home for her clients,’ Krasnostein suggests, ‘Sandra has made a home for herself. Despite having experienced worse blows than many of her clients, she is the one who comes in to make order out of their chaos’ (149–150). And here is the fundamental question of this book—how has Sandra survived in ways that other people haven’t?

At first subtly, and then directly, Krasnostein draws a link between her own experience of the trauma of abandonment with the lives of both Sandra and her clients. And it is through her experience that Krasnostein starts to articulate one way through trauma. Even though she was abandoned she still felt a sense of belonging and love. And so while order may be the opposite of trauma, belonging and being loved go a long way to limiting its effects.

Questions for discussion

1. Sandra has been ‘righting her environment—cleaning it, organising it, coordinating it, filling in gaps where she can, hiding them where she can’t—since she was a child. It is her way of imposing order on the world’ (16). Krasnostein sees ‘Order being the true opposite of Trauma’ (6). Do you agree?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. Krasnostein sometimes addresses Sandra directly in the book. Why do you think she does this? How does it relate to Krasnostein’s desire to create order in telling Sandra’s story?
5. Do you think Krasnostein has the ‘right’ to Sandra’s story? What about the stories of Sandra’s clients?
6. 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?
7. Discuss compassion as defined by Brené Brown and as explored by Krasnostein after she tells us of her anger (251–3).
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. After describing Peter leaving Linda, Krasnostein says: ‘He will never really confront the exquisite hardship—financial, physical and emotional—that his leaving placed on Linda’ (58). But it is also true that the memory of leaving his family will ‘hurt his heart forever’ (59). How morally responsible is Sandra for the way Peter treated Linda and abandoned his sons?
11. ‘Emotion cannot be selectively numbed. If we are too good at it for too long we will numb our ability to form true connections with ourselves and others, which is the only thing we are here for’ (251). Do you agree with this statement? Is it impossible to try to numb only negative emotions? Is connectedness the ‘only thing we are here for’?
12. ‘Having lived so long without the true gift of family—unconditional love—she is not equipped to take on the true burden of family—unconditional sacrifice’ (219). Are these accurate assessments of the gifts and burdens of family?
13. Why do you think Sandra’s touchstone of ‘success’ is ‘normality’, including having straight, cis-gendered friends?
14. 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?
15. Following on from the previous question, talk about one of the central concerns of the book: why does trauma affect people so differently?