

Wellcome Book Prize 2019 Reading Group Guide

Now celebrating its 10th anniversary, the Wellcome Book Prize rewards exceptional works of literature that illuminate the many ways that health, medicine and illness touch our lives.



The Trauma Cleaner **by Sarah Krasnostein**

The Text Publishing Company

About the author

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

About the book

The author charts the extraordinary Sandra Pankhurst bringing order and care to the living and the dead, in her role as a trauma cleaner. A compelling story of a fascinating life, and an affirmation that, as isolated as we may feel, we are all in this together.

Sandra Pankhurst started life as an abused adopted son in a working-class family. Following marriage, fatherhood and divorce, she made the transition to living as a woman. Now, as a trauma cleaner she helps those at life's dark extremes. In telling Sandra's extraordinary story, Sarah Krasnostein shines a light on the complex and lasting legacies of trauma.

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Questions and discussion points

1. Trauma cleaning can be seen as a physical representation of putting someone's life back in order. Why do you think being surrounded by order can be helpful to someone who has experienced a trauma?
2. Some of the descriptions of the homes Sandra is cleaning are shocking. Why do you think some people may spend decades hoarding belongings before asking for help?
3. The alternating chapters allow us to gradually learn about Sandra's own trauma between hearing about her current work. Do you think this structure is important?
4. Sandra shows an extraordinary amount of resilience and care for others. What impact has her background had on her personality?
5. Sandra has gaps in her memory and trouble placing events chronologically. Why does she have this difficulty in remembering her past?

Suggested reading

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematorium by Caitlin Doughty

All That Remains by Sue Black

Trans Bodies, Trans Selves edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth

The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk

Useful links

[‘I started dry retching’: the harrowing world of a trauma cleaner](#)

[The Trauma Cleaner review: Sarah Krasnostein's looks at a woman of compassion](#)

[Coming Clean – interview with Sandra Pankhurst](#)

[How strong we are, when we know we are loved](#)