

## KEEPSAKE Author Q&A

### **Why did you choose to write about hoarding?**

I've long been fascinated with compulsions. An early, unpublished manuscript featured a character with OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) -- tapping rituals, in the case of that book. Years ago, I watched an episode of Oprah featuring a hoarder whose physical appearance was stylish and neat. Her home was beautiful from the outside. She was intelligent, articulate and composed. Inside her home was a horror show of filth and debris. I was struck when she characterized herself as a perfectionist and showed the producers a clean, unsullied garbage can. She couldn't bear to put anything inside it and ruin its perfection. Astonishing. It's only natural I would eventually write about something that fascinates me, so, here we are.

### **How did you research this novel?**

The non-fiction book, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, by Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee was a tremendous resource, and I urge anyone interested in this topic to go read it. The same authors, along with David F. Tolin, also wrote a workbook called *Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving and Hoarding*, which is meant as a self-help guide for hoarders. I filled it out "in character" as Trish. That was tremendously helpful as far as figuring out exactly what kind of hoarder she would be. There are many varieties of hoarding. It is not a cookie-cutter disorder. I read other books, too (see the acknowledgments section for a list). Of course, I watched the hoarding reality shows currently popular on cable TV. I have mixed feelings about the shows. Seeing hoarders in action as they tried to part with their items was illuminating for me as a writer. They are educational and they seem to help some of the people featured. But the shows also feel exploitive and seem to oversimplify hoarding. The books I consulted were more nuanced and realistic.

As for the character of Seth, I was lucky enough to have gotten back in touch with a former roommate who is herself a clinical psychologist. I already had the Seth character in the works when we connected again. A wonderful bit of serendipity! She helped me nail his character and introduced me to the concept of compassion fatigue.

### **How did you choose the setting?**

Trish's rural house is fictional, but the nearby cities of Grand Ledge and Lansing are real. It's easy to keep secrets when you have acreage and dense woods surrounding your house. I'll admit to thinking of my friend Jill's rural home when I came up with the setting, but she is very neat and has a lovely house! As for me, I live in an older suburb and I'm close to my own neighbors. It would be challenging to hoard on my block without someone noticing -- not impossible, though. According to my research, hoarders are surprisingly good at keeping their secret.

### **Have you ever known a hoarder?**

Not personally. Not that I know of, anyway (see above). However, in one of the places I've lived (I'm being vague on purpose to protect privacy) there was a house that the neighbors disdained for its extreme outside clutter, along with clutter visible on the enclosed front porch. I have since realized during my research that this could very well have been the home of a hoarder. Some hoarders have neat exteriors, actually, but for others, the disarray extends to the yard.

I also reported in my newspaper days on the city's dealings with an elderly man whose house was packed to the rafters to the point it was hazardous. I didn't think about it then, but now it seems obvious he was a compulsive hoarder. I never saw the inside of his home myself, however. I can't remember why I didn't; it's likely he would have refused me entrance, though we did talk on the phone several times. I'd handle that story differently now, I'm sure of it, knowing what I know now.

**Do you relate more to Mary, the neat-freak, or Trish, the hoarder?**

I relate to them both! The older I get, the less tolerance I have for mess and disorder. I can physically feel more relaxed in a neat and clean setting. I'm more sympathetic every day to my mother, who used to insist on a clean bedroom -- at the very least the part of my room she could see from the hallway. (My childhood room was at the end of the hall so anyone in the living room of our little house could see straight in.) Nowadays, it makes me crazy when horizontal surfaces are treated as storage space for random clutter. That said, houses are meant to be lived in by real human beings, and that means messes will happen. Love and fun trump perfect cleanliness any day.

As for Trish, I absolutely relate. In recent years, we cleaned out every bit of our home, and purged boxes upon boxes of old, unused items, some of which related to my children and had some sentimental value. It was so hard to watch my first child's baby toys be carted off at a garage sale! That being said, my house is meant to be lived in by my family as it is now, not exist as a museum to what used to be.

I will admit I still have my children's crib, though. Make of that what you will.