

Sawbones 250: Possession

Published October 28th, 2018

[Listen here on themcelroy.family](https://themcelroy.family)

Intro (Clint McElroy): *Sawbones* is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: It's, uh, gettin' spooky out there, Syd.

Sydnee: That's right, Justin. It's a very spooky time of year.

Justin: It's a very spooky time of year. And we've reflected that in, uh, all manner of ways, but I think this is the first with—sorry, investigations of—I believe the episode is called *Aaahh! Real Monsters?*

Sydnee: Yes?

Justin: That Rileigh took my place on. Uh, and a few others. But this is the first time that I've seen you, Sydnee McElroy, get... a little bit spooked.

Sydnee: That's right, Justin. I definitely did. When I was doing research for this week's episode, I realized—and this will become apparent once we get into it—that this, uh—this is the beginning of many a horror film.

I am the science-based, skeptical researcher looking into a supernatural topic with great skepticism, and I am concerned as to what's gonna happen to me over the course of the next week. Until November, and then Halloween's over and I won't worry about these things anymore.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, but we're gonna talk about possession, and exorcism.

And I wanna thank Grace and Megan and Sarah and Haley and First and Lisa and Courtney and Cathy and Maggie for suggesting this topic.

Uh, so Justin, you've probably heard of the concept of possession. You probably know what I'm talkin' about when I say possession.

Justin: Yes, I do. Uh, it was, uh... a spirit, or perhaps a ghost, or maybe even a demon—

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Going into the body of another person.

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: And, like, takin' the wheel.

Sydnee: That's pretty much it. And this concept spans cultures and geography and time. I mean, this—you find this idea that these, uh, malevolent forces, spirits, demons, whatever your cultural or religious concept of them is—the idea that they can take us over, inhabit us, control us—this is not unique to one religion at all, even though I think a lot of us when we think about the word "exorcism" immediately reflect on *The Exorcist*, and... you know. Kind of the Roman Catholic view—

Justin: *Repossessed*, starring Leslie Nielsen and Linda Blair.

Sydnee: Is that what you think of?

Justin: I think of the hit film, uh, *Repossessed*, starring Leslie Nielsen and Linda Blair.

Sydnee: I always—and maybe this is what informs my, um, uh... trepidation as I—the more research I did on this topic—

Justin: Sorry, trepanation?

Sydnee: Yes? Uh, is that I, having been raised in that, uh, religion... you're taught, I mean, that—you know this stuff might happen! And so it's hard to take a science eye at it sometimes.

Justin: A science eye. Is that—

Sydnee: A scientist's eye. A sci—

Justin: [singing in a deep voice] Bill Nye the Science Eye!

Sydnee: I just—I know whatever I say is gonna be playing—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: —on some magical recording as the demon hunts me in the middle of the night... later this week. I know that's gonna happen.

Justin: Sydnee is very—Sydnee's very worried about the opening narrative that she has established for herself by being a disbelieving skeptic doctor with a background in Catholicism, disbelieving in the power of demons.

Sydnee: That's right.

Justin: Like, she has set herself up for an Act One.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] So—

Justin: Who do you want to play you in the movie? [holding back laughter] After you're killed by demons, I mean.

Sydnee: Oh, 'cause I won't be around. I was gonna say, well, me.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Uh, Raleigh would be a good choice. She looks like me.

Justin: Uh, they're comin' for her next.

Sydnee: Oh.

Justin: The demons are definitely comin' for her next. They're not gonna stop with you.

Sydnee: No. She'll listen and learn and run.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: She'll save the day. So, did you know that this is opposed to demonic obsession? I didn't know this word. Demonic *obsession*, which is when a demon is, like—I mean, obsessed with you.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, like—

Justin: Evan Rachel Wood by the way is what I would go with. I had to think about it for a second.

Sydnee: Wow, thanks.

Justin: Yeah, you're welcome.

Sydnee: Uh, that's just when like a demon messes with you all the time, but that's from the outside. Possession is like they took over. And there are many people, certainly, who believe in the existence of these forces, and demons that can take you over, and then there are many of us who don't necessarily believe in that.

Uh, and for those who don't believe in the concept of possession, it's natural to try to look for a scientific explanation. So, as we look back through history and we see people who are demonstrating symptoms of what was called possession—

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: —what could that actually be? And some of those—and again, I'm saying symptoms as opposed to... I don't know, I guess if an exorcist were talking they would say manifestations of the possession?

Justin: Demonic presence, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Uh, could be things like cursing or yelling blasphemous things, you might injure yourself, create, like, scratches or bite yourself. And, like, in the movies you'll see, like, words appearing in skin, you know, which we usually would blame on the person, like, scratching a word into themselves or something.

Um, you develop this aversion to things that have holy or cultural significance, so crucifixes or holy water or—you know, obviously this would vary depending on the religious background.

Justin: Throwing up. Did you do throwing up very hard?

Sydnee: Right, puking a lot and head spinning—

Justin: Head spinning around.

Sydnee: —no, that's not—that's actually not, like, the classic symptom of possession.

Justin: Ohh. So *The Exorcist* isn't a classic! You heard it here, folks.

Sydnee: No, I don't mean the movie. I just mean...

Justin: Film buff Sydnee McElroy has spoken.

Sydnee: No, that movie scared the crap out of me when I was a kid.

Justin: I didn't get it. I didn't get why it was scary. I didn't—I saw it too late. I saw it in, like, my mid-20s, and I just was, like, looking around like, "Whaaat is scary about this?"

Sydnee: Yeah. You say that, but see, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, which we're gonna talk about a little bit, which I saw as an adult, still scared the crap out of me.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Uh, so some of the stuff that I think makes even medical professionals sometimes follow—uh, be misled and go down the wrong diagnostic path, I would say, are things that people can't explain as well. Stuff that's moving around, or the bed shaking, pictures flying off the walls, stuff that people have said happened during these episodes of possession or exorcism.

People knowing languages they shouldn't know, you know? Speaking in Latin when they've never learned Latin. Or facts about people that they shouldn't know otherwise. Like being able to—someone walks in the room and being able to—what I would call do a cold read on them.

Justin: Mm-hmm. It's... it's worth noting that these things are—there's not, like, supernatural claims that we're—we are not lending credence to supernatural claims here. It's just not necessarily in line—I'm sure there are rational explanations for these things.

Sydnee: Well, doing a cold read on somebody is—I mean, that's something that a false clairvoyant will do in order to trick you into thinking they're clairvoyant, so.

Justin: It's like the bit in *Peewee's Big Adventure* when she looks in his wallet and he has a picture of the Al—you know, a picture of his bike in there, and—

Sydnee: Exactly.

Justin: There's a picture of the Alamo, and the billboard across the street.

Sydnee: That kind of thing. It's the same thing as, like, if you're gonna do that stuff in, like, a live studio audience going around and checking license plates on cars, and gathering info based on that kind of thing. You know? It's that same idea.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: Um—uh, sexual behaviors. That's a common thing, especially in the presence of, like, a religious person or an artifact. Something that would seem very inappropriate, you know? Because that's associated with, like, demons, right? They're gonna do the most outrageous thing.

Um, historically we've seen causes that aren't necessarily any kind of medical or any kind of cause other than some sort of, like, political or social motivation. So you can look at certain cases where, like, a whole group of people were supposedly possessed.

Um, sometimes these were groups of nuns who were demonstrating these, you know, signs of possession, and saying awful, blasphemous things, and acting out in sexual ways, and all these things that nuns aren't supposed to do. And it may

have been as a reaction to, like, the religious influences of the time, and a way for the church to drive more people into the church, or as a reactions against overreach of the church—there were all kinds of, like, political reasons that some of these big things have happened.

Um, but what's more interesting to me is, like, the individual cases of possession that probably had medical reasons that were totally missed and misdiagnosed as possession, because people didn't understand it.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: An obvious one is the plague. So, during the plague years a lot of people chalked up the symptoms and manifestations of the plague to demons.

Justin: There was a lot of magical thinking during the plague years.

Sydnee: For sure.

Justin: A lot of these are tied into that, 'cause it's just—I think people couldn't conceive of the horribleness.

Sydnee: And it certainly—I think you're exactly right. It certainly seemed that way. Like, everyone was sick, and not just sick, but sick in a really awful... a way that—a death that would be horrible for the person who was sick, but then also for their family to experience, and then everybody around them would get sick, and—I mean, you could see where you would begin to believe, in the right cultural milieu and with no understanding of science, that, "Oh my gosh, this has gotta be evil. This has gotta be demons."

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: In response to that, a lot of people actually started trying to perform exorcisms. Just, like—

Justin: Just regular..

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Low—low—low-cost—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —[through laughter] budget, "We come to your door" exorcisms? Like, Etsy exorcisms?

Sydnee: That's what I was gonna say. Like, DIY exorcisms.

Justin: [through laughter] Right. [laughs]

Sydnee: Or, like, you—[laughs] you could just do it like—put one on your Pinterest board so that you could do it at home. Just, like—is that what Pinterest is? [laughs]

Justin: Use Fiverr to—you could pay somebody five bucks to come and exorcise your home.

Sydnee: That's exactly—so people started doing their own home exorcisms, and the Catholic church said, "Well, listen. Um... we—we don't know—"

Justin: "Don't." [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: "—we don't know exactly what's going on, either."

Justin: [simultaneously] "That's our ba—that's our moneymaker. That's our profit center."

Sydnee: Uh—yeah. "But we don't want just anybody doing an exorcism, 'cause you're—" you know, and this is not—this is, one, based on their domination, but two, based on the idea that these are forces they don't understand.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: And you don't want people messin' around with 'em.

Justin: You may just make the demon angrier.

Sydnee: Exactly. Uh, so Pope Paul V published the Rite of Exorcism in 1614, and this is what a lot of people think of when they think of exorcisms, like, in popular culture today. Like in *The Exorcist*. That's what—that's what's being referenced, the Roman Catholic Rite of Exorcism.

And this was not just a way for removing demons, 'cause that's what you do when you exorcise a demon, right? You just cast it out.

Uh, this was not just a way to do that—like, the actual order of steps and things you say, but a way to diagnose it. And what's interesting to me is that they specifically mention that if the patient seems to be demonstrating melancholy, which would've been just a term for kind of any kind of mental illness of the time, before we knew how to diagnose mental illness—but if you think it's that, don't do an exorcism. Send them to a doctor.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: So that was said, even back in the 1600s.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That this is—

Justin: Now, now, that being said, of course, this is the 1600s, so the doctor is not gonna be much more use.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: [through laughter] Perhaps even *worse* than a priest!

Sydnee: "Go to the doctor, so that he can... bleed you."

Justin: "Bleed you, and—" yeah.

Sydnee: "Give you something that will make you puke."

Justin: "Goat dookie. [through laughter] Whatever."

Sydnee: "Perhaps slap a poultice on you. Definitely not help you, but—"

Justin: "Tie a—tie a chicken to your arm."

Sydnee: "Tie a chicken to your arm and let it die, and then you'll... I don't know."

Justin: "Lance the bubos."

Sydnee: "Go back to the priest, 'cause you'd prefer the exorcism at this point."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Uh, but what are some of the other reasons that people may have displayed symptoms that were confused with this idea of possession? Some we've talked about. One obvious example is epilepsy.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Somebody moving without control of their body, you know, who doesn't remember the episode, who can't tell you why they did or what they did. Outside of the context of a neurological disorder, could look very much like they were being controlled by an outside force, and since nobody wants to have a seizure, you would assume it was a—an evil force, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So epilepsy was often confused—you can see where, like, Tourette's would've been interpreted that way.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: Um, someone just saying things out of nowhere that they don't mean to say and they can't control. Again, it's a lack of control is a big thing, 'cause if the person is not in control, the concept that your brain could control *you* in a sense...

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Which, I mean, it always does—it's, like, part of you. It's a weird thing to tease out. But the idea of mental illness, that it's not something that you can just talk away or will away, that concept would not have been well understood, obviously, right?

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: So, um—so anything in the psychiatric realm is certainly gonna be confused with possession. So dissociative disorders or what used to be called

multiple personality disorders—you know, if—and people would say, "I am possessed. There is a demon in me."

Um, and the reason they would say that—and that would often be taken at face value, but when you think, like, "Well, why would somebody say that?" Well, because you hear voices, or you see things that you know aren't actually physically present.

Justin: And whatever you have a cultural sort of structure around, that is gonna be the way it manifests for you.

Sydnee: Precisely. So whether that's the voice of God or the voice of the Devil, it kind of just depends on what they're saying in your head, right? And so if you have persecutory hallucinations, ones that tell you you're bad or tell you to hurt people, you may believe that you're possessed, and you tell people that, and they take you at face value.

So anybody with psychosis or schizophrenia—especially, you know, people who have these kinds of mental illness sometimes can neglect personal hygiene and that kind of thing, and that would have made someone seem other, seem removed from what you expect human behavior to be like, and you wouldn't understand why.

Um, mania, again, because it can manifest psychotic symptoms, and sleep paralysis, would all have been things that may have easily been confused, and if you look at these symptoms of quote, unquote "possession," you can see where a lot of these things overlap.

I mean, I have—I have spoken personally with patients who have psychotic disorders, that have these—you know, that believe they're talking to demons or angels.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Now, they don't necessarily tell me they're possessed, but you could see where you might think that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, one that we reference, the patient on the—that the movie *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* was based on—a very fictionalized version, by the way—

um, Anneliese Michel actually had been diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. Uh, and she probably—there were doctors who said she also did likely have schizophrenia. Um, so some combination of this neurological disorder and psychiatric illness—

Justin: But even with that, her family still... was wanting it to be something else.

Sydnee: Well, they had—it was already—they were very devout people. And so they already had this religious grounding. Uh, she began to believe that she was possessed by a demon, 'cause she couldn't control herself, and the medications that she was being placed on weren't working right away, and so instead of trying new medicines or assuming it was just the wrong medicine or dose or whatever, they pursued exorcism.

Uh, she was exorcised 67 times over the course of nine months, and eventually fatally... you know, perished from these exorci—well, not from the exorcism, but from malnutrition. She refused to eat towards the end, refused to eat or drink anything.

And, uh, her—it's actually—if you see the movie, what happens is a little different than what the actual case was. Uh, the parents and the priest who were involved were put on trial for this for murdering her, essentially. For negligent homicide.

And they were asking for a fairly light sentence for the priest, and then I think essentially—there's, like, a—it was actually in Germany. There's, like, a clause in German law that says if the parents have suffered enough, you don't send them to jail anymore.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Like, basically you've—what has happened to you is already the worst thing that ever could happen, so you're guilty, but we're done.

They actually sent them all to jail.

Justin: Wow, really?

Sydnee: Yeah. More than that was being asked for, because they felt they were so complicit in what happened to her. There were other similar cases that we could describe today.

In 1638 there was a woman, Dorothy Talbye, who almost certainly had postpartum psychosis based on modern interpretations of what happened, but nobody would've diagnosed that at the time.

There was a case earlier in the 1900s, actually, where a Romanian nun was taken to a hospital. She was at the convent, she began to have psychotic symptoms, they took her to the hospital, they diagnosed her with schizophrenia, but the other nuns and the priest said, "No, we think this is a religious thing," and brought her back and exorcised her instead. She actually also perished, secondary to these—

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: —to the—largely malnutrition again, just because they were...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... not feeding her, 'cause she was psychotic, and she believed possessed, and they believed possessed, and so on and so forth.

These tragic stories underline how *missing* that and missing these diagnoses, even when we know they're there—how terribly that can go.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, I wanna tell you about some more—all this seems very ancient, right?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: All this seems like it probably died out forever ago. Well, there was this big resurgence of exorcisms in the 60s and 70s, and this renewed interest, and I wanna talk about why that happened. But before we do that... let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go!

[theme music plays]

Justin: Folks, our first sponsor this week is MeUndies. They're ridiculously, offensively comfortable, and I want you to experience them. But they're not just underwear. Uh, they got some fall offerings like lounge pants that are made from the same, three-times-softer-than-cotton, micromodal fabric as the undies.

They have a jack-o-lantern print that I have in socks, and maybe undies? I don't remember. I think I do have it in undies too, yes.

Sydnee: We both do!

Justin: That is adorable. And most importantly, they've got a 100% satisfaction guarantee. If you don't love 'em, keep 'em, and they'll refund you. It is risk free!

And MeUndies has a great offer for our listeners. If you're a first time purchaser, when you purchase any MeUndies you get 15% off, *and...* free shipping. So you got nothin' to lose. Get your 15% off your first pair, free shipping, and a 100% satisfaction guarantee.

You've been hearin' about MeUndies long enough. Now's the time to take a chance on yourself, and take a chance on comfort.

Sydnee: Get into MeUndies! No, don't say that.

Justin: That's—that's a lot. Meundies.com/sawbones is the address to go to to get this great offer, the 15% off, free shipping, 100% satisfaction guarantee. Meundies.com/sawbones.

Also, Boll and Branch is sponsoring the show this week. You know, Syd and I disagree on... basically everything.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: When something is shared, a taste, between Sydnee and I, is shared, uh, it is a cause for celebration. It is a rarity. It's pretty much just *Parks and Rec*.

Sydnee: [snorts]

Justin: And, um... [pauses]

Sydnee: Our kids.

Justin: Our kids, yeah! Uh, but one thing we do agree on is that getting a night's sleep is—*would* be just delightful.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, would be a real dream, and it is more affordable than you might think, with new sheets from Boll and Branch. Uh, everything they make—bedding, blankets—it's made from 100% organic cotton, which means they start out really soft, and get even softer over time. A lot of great reviews on these products, five stars, and that's a five out of five scale. They don't specify here, but I'm assuming five stars is, like—they're saying is, like, the best review you can get.

Um, and there's no risk! You try 'em for 30 nights. If you don't love 'em, send 'em back for a refund! You're not gonna do that, but you can, if you want.

Uh, get started right now. Get \$50 off your first set of sheets at bollandbranch.com. Promo code is "sawbones." Go to bollandbranch.com today, for \$50 off your first set of sheets. That's bollandbranch.com, promo code "sawbones." Bollandbranch.com, promo code "sawbones."

Justin: So, Sydnee, you were about to, uh, delight us all with the resurgence, the revenge of exorcisms.

Sydnee: So it's—yes. It's really strange to me that you look at this period in the 60s and 70s where all of a sudden, um—I mean, along with, like, films and things, and books, and all that, people started doing exorcisms again.

And part of that is that it kind of expanded beyond the Catholic church, and, like, a lot of other Christian denominations—in addition to other faiths still are performing exorcisms, but just this particular resurgence—other Christian faiths began performing exorcisms, not using necessarily the Roman Catholic Rite, just their own version.

Justin: It's somethin' that's gettin' a lot of heat. They gotta get in on that. They gotta get a little of that publicity.

Sydnee: Well, it's easy to follow that if you think that God—if you believe in God as a force of good that can manifest itself in humans, then you believe in the Devil, maybe, as a force of evil that can manifest itself in humans.

It's easy to see where it would lead you down that road, if you are a religious-minded person.

Justin: You could also see why a religion, an organized religion, would wanna pounce on... what could very well appear to be a supernatural occurrence.

Sydnee: Sure.

Justin: In a time where those are not, obviously, commonplace.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: As they were, apparently, a few thousand years ago. But, like, why—since this is a supernatural occurrence you cannot disprove through traditional means, then maybe that, uh—that would be something that they'd wanna hop on.

Sydnee: And what's strange to me is that concurrently with, uh, spiritual leaders reexamining exorcism and possession, you see this interest in medical professionals.

So, on I wanna focus on is M. Scott Peck. He was an American psychiatrist who practiced in the mid-to-late 1900s, and he believed in possession in addition to psychiatric illness. So, smart guy, educated at Harvard, went to med school at Case Western, practiced psychiatry, but his own kind of journey in faith led him to become very devout, and he began to question whether or not our dismissal of possession wasn't a mistake, and that while most of his patients certainly had psychiatric diagnoses, some of them might actually be influenced by demons, and we are not going to ever be able to take care of them until we acknowledge it.

He used the example of a fellow psychiatrist that was telling that one of his patients who, at the time, had what they called multiple personality disorder—had, like, 46 different personalities. And he said he believed that that was impossible, and that this was probably a demonic possession, maybe Judas, because he was a trickster demon, and so...

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: So, like, there—things like this—

Justin: What's he doin'?

Sydnee: —that seem unlikely, he began to blame on demons. And his mentor, who was a Jesuit priest, Father Malachi Martin—

Justin: That's a very good name.

Sydnee: It's a good name, but he's a controversial guy.

Justin: Dang it! I gotta stop complimenting people on their names before I know anything about them! I always get the raw end of that deal.

Sydnee: It's—so, Malachi Martin was largely disliked by the Catholic church because he—he believed very strongly in possession and performing exorcisms, and he began to suspect that perhaps the hierarchy of the Catholic church were all under the influence of demons... [holding back laughter] themselves.

Justin: I—I can't imagine he was an unpopular dude. Although, you know, Syd, [holding back laughter] sometimes I think *my* bosses are possessed by demons— [snorts] [through laughter] TGIF.

Sydnee: Waka waka!

Justin: [through laughter] TGIF.

Sydnee: Well, that's your—you're your own boss.

[pauses]

Justin: [demonic growl] TGIF.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] So... uh, based on his work with Father Malachi Martin and his own experiences and faith, he began to believe that some people are evil. Evil. Just evil people.

Justin: Just evil.

Sydnee: And that if some people are evil, there has to—you know, and some people are good—good people, he believed, derived that goodness from their faith and their following the teachings of God. Bad people must be influenced by something else, too.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, the Devil, demons, whatever you wanna call it. And he believed that once you were completely taken over by a demon and you were just an evil person, then you were probably something more like someone with antisocial personality disorder, essentially just devoid of conscience, right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But possessed people were, like, vulnerable. They were still struggling. Possessed people were still fighting for their souls. So, uh, he believed that possession was a place where he could intervene.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, and this had to do with his—it's important you understand, he believed there were four stages of possession.

Justin: Okay?

Sydnee: First is temptation, where, like, you just wanna do bad things, but you're not. Second—

Justin: But you're thinkin' about it.

Sydnee: But you're thinkin' about it. Second is demonic attack, when the demon is trying to get inside you. And so, like, you're hearing voices or seeing things or whatever. Like, spooky stuff's happening, but it's not inside you yet.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Uh, third is oppression, when the demon—the way he described it is, "The demon has taken control of the suburbs—"

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: —but, like, the city center is still intact.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And then the final stage is possession, when the demon is pretty much in control, but there are still pockets of resistance that are trying to fight back.

Justin: So like Buffy Season Three. The demon's the mayor.

Sydnee: [laughs] The demon's the mayor.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But Buffy's still there.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: If the demon was the—if the demon was the mayor and Buffy was wiped out, then you're just evil, and so then it—then the battle is lost, and there is no point in trying to... like, help that person, in a sense.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Um, but—so he asked Malachi Martin for a couple cases of people who were possessed, because he wanted to try to exorcise them and record it, and then eventually he went on to write a book about it. Um, the two cases were two women, Jersey and Becca. Both—I mean, exhibiting clear signs of mental illness.

Both had kind of tragic stories of abuse. Jersey was a young wife and mother. She had a history of abuse when she was younger, and basically she just had lost interest in the roles she was playing in her life. She had no interest in being a mom, no interest in being a wife, just no interest in anything.

She believed that she was under the possession of some sort of demonic spirit, some sort of evil force that prevented her from being happy and being who she was and being a good mom. And so she went to a priest.

The priest actually referred her to Peck, who, remember, is a psychiatrist, a doctor—uh, and he got together a team of clergy and mental health professionals and did an exorcism. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, which is a strange—like, she went to the priest, he sent her to a doctor, and then she got an exorcism.

Justin: Yeah. Oh, no, yeah. "The priest—did you hear?"

"Yeah, he's right. It is, in my opinion, you got the Devil."

Sydnee: It's good to remember to stay in your lane, guys. Uh, so they began an exorcism. The process of the exorcism—and you can read excerpts from this. You can buy his books if you're really interested in this. Like, just from a sociological perspective, what did this guy do?

Uh, the exorcisms are interesting, because a lot of it is like psychotherapy.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, they would start with praying and everything, just like a religious exorcism would—

Justin: And this is all religious people are there—

Sydnee: No! There are doctors there too, and social workers. And then there's also just some random people sometimes. Like one, there's just, like, a—a guy.

Justin: "So there's Rabbi Wicher, and then there's Dr. Phillips, and I'm Doug. And I'm here—honestly, I'm here to have somebody for the demon to leap into after they leap out of that person."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "That is why I am here."

Sydnee: "I'm part of it." [laughs]

Justin: "I'm part of it. I—money's tight and I can't donate plasma again, so I'm basically here to... let the demon jump into me."

Sydnee: "This guy offered me 20 bucks."

Justin: "[through laughter] To let the demon jump into me!"

Sydnee: So—so for, like, 30 to 40 hours total, uh, over the course of three or four days, he did these exorcisms on these two different women. Um, and they would take breaks, by the way. And I thought it was really interesting. Like, the possessed people would take breaks, too. And, like, have coffee and joke for a few minutes and then be like, "Okay, gotta get back to the—"

Justin: "Ah, here he comes again. Whoops!"

Sydnee: "—demonic posse—" Well, and it really was like that. Like, then they would start talking and he'd go, "Okay, I wanna talk to a demon now." And then they would manifest one of their demons.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Um, so the—and then he would talk to—like, kind of talk 'em out. Like, "Listen, this demon is lying. Let me talk to 'em for a while and I'll tell you why they're lying."

And anyway, through this, Jersey was freed of her demons. Becca, the other patient who had a history of an abusive husband and depression and some addiction issues, uh, she—while she felt the possession ended by the end of the exorcism, she stayed under what Peck called demonic attack, so she still continued to hear voices and such, even though she felt like the majority of her symptoms had eased.

They did do some of the, like, restraining and things, like tying them to the bed and stuff.

Justin: Eugh.

Sydnee: But it was largely just talking. Uh, he declared this a success and published his book, and began to urge psychiatrists that we need to include demonic possession as a psychiatric diagnosis.

Justin: No thank you. I think that that's a very bad precedent, and I would like to say, thank you, no, thank you, thank you, please.

Sydnee: And what's really strange—

Justin: Unless we're gonna put "The Mondays" in the DSM, I'd rather not.

Sydnee: Well, and that was what was really strange to me, is that I saw this and I thought, "Well, I mean... this is kind of like that New Age time. Like, a lot of people suggested a lot of weird stuff."

Justin: Yeah, that's fair.

Sydnee: Like, you know, we can move past that. But what was strange to me is that I found psychiatrists—not many. This is not the view of psychiatrists or the American Psychiatric Association as a whole by *any* stretch, but there are practicing doctors who believe that there is mental illness, and there is possession, and sometimes there's both, and that you cannot cure these patients without performing an exorcism, and they are *still* doing that. Doctors! Who are helping perform exorcisms with the appropriate religious officials in the US, today.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: Uh, for people who—I mean, let's—they probably have psychiatric illness that just is very difficult to control and has manifested itself in some, like, religiously-fixated symptoms.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, I saw another argument that was pretty persuasive that you could use some of the tools of an exorcism to help a patient who *felt* they were possessed, that they did—and this was not an argument that they might *be* possessed. It was, "They are clearly not possessed. They have psychiatric illness, but there are tools within the process of an exorcism that help you to, like—"

Justin: You're basically working within the framework of the delusion.

Sydnee: Exactly. To—instead of trying to integrate that into your personality, to cast out the part that is so damaging to you. So, like, they provided a framework for that, which I found compelling from a psychiatric perspective, but still isn't, like, the accepted theory on what to do with delusions.

I mean, you're supposed to always refute delusions. Like, there is not—there is no, I would say, accepted method for joining your patient in their delusion.

Justin: So do you, Dr. McElroy, as a, uh... uh, someone who grew up in the Catholic church and is now a physician, do you—where do you stand on all this?

Sydnee: Well, I—researching this episode, I certainly got creeped out, as I said. And so I can see—

Justin: It's creepy when science people—*real* science people start to lend credence to stuff like this. It creeps you out!

Sydnee: That is what—that's what shocked me the most, was—'cause all of it I was just doin' my usual stuff, like, "I can't believe used to believe this. This is wild."

And then I got to the point where modern physicians are buying into this now, and using it as part of their medical practice, and that I found very disturbing.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, because it's important that we recognize that psychiatric illness is a medical condition, and not, um—and n—[holding back laughter] certainly not a manifestation of evil.

Uh, that label being applied to patients with illness we didn't understand, whether psychiatric or neurological or otherwise, throughout the centuries, has been damaging, has been stigmatizing, has resulted in deaths, as we've discussed, has resulted in the complete marginalization of people, and at the end of the day, doesn't help you.

Um, if you—I certainly see a role for—I know I have patients who receive therapy from psychologists or social workers or therapists or counselors who share their faith background, and they discuss that in their therapy, and so I can see where for some people that can be very effective and healing, but beyond that, it has no role in medicine, because it's not... it's not a thing. These people are ill, and they need help, through medical methods. Not things that you can provide in any sort of religious institution.

Justin: Uh, folks, thank you so much for listening to the episode this week. We have a book out! [Bit.ly/thesawbonesbook](https://bit.ly/thesawbonesbook). You can buy it on Amazon. If you

would leave us a review on Amazon if you liked it, that would sure mean a lot to use.

Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program, and thanks to you for listening! We sure appreciate it.

Sydnee: Yeah, thanks!

Justin: Uh, that is gonna do it for us for this week, so until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And, as always, don't drill a hole in your head!

[theme music plays]

Maximumfun.org.

Comedy and Culture.

Artist Owned.

Listener Supported.