

Sawbones 140: Pliny the Elder

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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:

Alright, hello everybody and welcome to Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

[audience cheers]

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy. [audience cheers a little bit louder]

Justin:

Okay. I'm gonna have to... All right. I'm gonna have to get the judge-o-meter out here a little later to see where exactly on the... Okay, that's fine.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

They just know me already. They're just comfortable with me now. It's fine.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

We have a thing.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

We have a thing now.

Justin:

Special chemistry. Hello, New York City. Center of the Universe.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

I can't say the next line because we run a clean show.

Sydnee:

That's true.

Justin:

But anyway, don't listen to—

Sydnee:

That's the third time that you've broken into Rent since we've been here.

Justin:

Yeah.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

And by here she means literally on the wings of the stage. And here. It's been a robust evening. So Sydnee, uh, this is a big show for us. This is the biggest city basically on the planet, New York City. And you said you wanted to do something, like, really special for this one.

Sydnee:

Yes, I did.

Justin:

Something that would really set it apart.

Sydnee:

That's true. And I thought what is more special, if you don't listen to Sawbones, um, you should.

Justin:

Shame on you.

Sydnee:

But we talk about medical history and all the things that we've done wrong in the past in medicine, and one of our most frequent guests, I guess. Guest-perts?

Justin:

Special guests? Yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Special guest, uh, is someone called Pliny the Elder.

Justin:

It's happening.

Sydnee:

It's about time, we gave Pliny his own show. And I thought he deserved a live show and a live show in New York City, for sure.

Justin:

Yeah, Pliny the Elder. He certainly knew of your city. Certainly one day he dreamed of performing on the Great White Way.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Now we are fulfilling that dream for Pliny the Elder.

Sydnee:

And it makes me so happy to think that we're saying Pliny the Elder and people are cheering for him right now. You know, Plin— like, if he could have even imagined.

Justin:

What a treat it must be for him. I can't imagine.

Sydnee:

If you don't listen to our show, you're going, "What? Who?"

Justin:

Who is this old guy?

Sydnee:

I'm gonna tell you who. So Pliny the Elder, also known as Gaius Plinius Secundus.

Justin:

Nice. I'd go with Pliny, too.

Sydnee:

I don't know, Gaius? That's a good name.

Justin:

Gaius is good. Then he kind of loses the plot, then he brings it back towards the end.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Kind of all over the place.

Sydnee:

Do you think his parents are just big fans?

Justin:

Of what? Of Battlestar Galactica? Sorry. "Someday— I have two dreams. One day my son's gonna perform in New York City. Uh, and I want him to

perform in a passion play called Battlestar Galactica." I say passion plays because they didn't have a TV. I know they had those, I think, probably.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

What's his story?

Sydnee:

So he was born in AD 23. Uh, lived until August 25, AD 79. We know that exact date. That's rare.

Justin:

That's really rare, yeah.

Sydnee:

We usually don't know those kind of dates. Um, but we do because it was a big event, and I'll tell you about that, but not till the end. We want them to live first.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So he was born to Gaius Plinius Celer and Marcella in Como. He had a sister named Plinea.

Justin:

Come on.

Sydnee:

Pliny and Plinea. I, like, that's cute.

Justin:

It is cute.

Sydnee:

I don't know that they were twins, but in my mind, they were twins.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, they were members of the equestrian class.

Justin:

What? I'm into that.

Sydnee:

I know. I know you are. I didn't make this up. You would think I did, but I didn't.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

No, and I had to look, what does that mean? Because my thought was the horse class. And I didn't know what did that signify in the caste system? So that meant that they had at least 400,000 sesteras and presumably horses, [laughs] I guess.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

I mean, I figure.

Justin:

Or they were horses

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Not—

Justin:

Was Pliny a horse this whole time? No, probably not, he's probably a person 'cause the writing.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Can always tell a horse by the fact that can't write.

Sydnee:

You got it.

Justin:

Yeah. Trench coat? Don't be fooled.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

That can still be a horse, my friend.

Sydnee:

We caught two horses on each other's shoulders trying to sneak into the show earlier in a trench coat.

Justin:

Yeah, mustache, glued it on with his brother 'cause horses are made at, whatever.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Anyway, that's the next show.

Justin:

That's the next show, horse isn't glue.

Sydnee:

So that was because you had to be rich to own a horse at the time. So equestrian class, and, uh, no one really knew what to do with horses yet. Like you had one. And that was great. But you didn't really know, like, what do we do with them?

And we have to feed them and like, take care of them. So that's like, a lot of money for something that we're not really sure to, like, we're not yoking it to things and plowing things or whatever. I don't know, whatever you do, whatever practical use a horse has. I feel like—

Justin:

None.

Sydnee:

[laughs] So, uh, and if you rode a horse in battle, then basically you just got to kind of hang back. And like, watch all the other guys on foot do all the work. So, it was like a big deal if you could have a horse 'cause then you've lived, I guess. So. Anyway, that was the class he was part of. [laughs]

Uh, he was an author, obviously, we're going to talk a lot about what he wrote. But he was also a navy and army commander for the Roman military. And he was a buddy of one of the Emperor's, Vespasian. And he was a philosopher and a lawyer and a naturalist. So, he had— He wore many hats.

Justin:

Busy guy.

Sydnee:

Yeah, I don't know if he wore hats. But sure.

Justin:

No, they didn't, they weren't invented for 100 years.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Oh. There was— If you ever look— if you ever Google Pliny, um, [laughs] you'll find a beer, which is great. Pliny the Elder the beer, but you'll also

probably stumble across Pliny the Younger, who was his nephew, not his son.

Pliny never had any children. He never married and never had any children. But he did have a nephew. And he left everything to him, including his name, I guess. So that's—

Justin:

That's probably part of the deal, actually. That was probably more a condition than an inheritance. Got to call yourself Pliny.

Sydnee:

So, before he started saying a lot of things about medicine that were wrong, that are the reason we're talking about him on a podcast, um, he rose through the ranks of the military.

That was the beginning of his career. He was already a writer, and he, uh, wrote books about, like, launching missiles and like throwing things while on horseback. [laughs] Like how to do that well, while you're—

Justin:

I'm not a big book guy, but that sounds like a very good book.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin:

To me. Yes, please.

Sydnee:

Uh, he wrote a history of various wars. After his service ended, he wanted to write books of more meaning, uh, but this was during Nero's reign. And so you couldn't write anything 'cause he was kind of crazy, Nero was.

So you couldn't write anything that was really controversial, 'cause then he'd, like, have you killed. So, he had to be kind of, like, fly under the radar.

So, he wrote books mainly about, like, grammar and rhetoric. And I mean, pretty, that's boring stuff, right?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah, grammar. Um, [laughs] um, and like a biography of a friend. It's pretty harmless.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, but under Vespasian, he actually got to hold a role in the government. And then he began to like, pursue what he wanted to do. He was, like, a local governor of sorts, um, to parts of, like, France and Spain and Libya, he was a trusted adviser to the Emperor until his death.

Um, and then he returned to Rome in like AD 75, 76 and this is when he wrote the book and then published it the following year, that we know him best for. And the book that I cite on our show a lot, and that's Natural History. Now, Natural History is a huge book. It's sort of like the first encyclopedia.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

More or less.

Justin:

It makes sense that we would want to write down what natural history was, 'cause you walk outside, what are those? A tree. Was there a tree there that last week? I have no way of knowing.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

I don't know. There's one now that should be enough for you. Live in the moment, Dan. Dannius.

Sydnee:

[laughs] And Pliny could tell you, 'cause he wrote down all the trees. He wrote down all the trees, and all the rocks, and all the plants, all the animals. He wrote about space. He wrote about humans. He wrote about history. He wrote about anything. It was everything. It was the, like, Encarta, maybe of their time. [laughs]

Justin:

Hold, uh, the phone.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

If that's the Encarta of his time, what's the Encarta of our time?

[audience laughs]

Justin:

'Cause it ain't Encarta. What? That entire brand name has been relegated to windbreakers from the mid 90s. I worked at Encarta. Good. Congratulations. Shipped a fine product, a lot of discs.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Encarta? You know about Wikipedia, I've seen you on it. Encarta?

[audience laughs]

Justin:

You can tell that Sydnee's working on an episode of Sawbones, 'cause you see her to go to Lycos, and then ...

[audience laughs]

Justin:

No, nothing there. Let's check dog bile. Better Ask Jeeves if he could check Encarta. Encarta.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

I don't still have that disc.

Justin:

So he made Encarta.

Sydnee:

I mean, basically, 'cause like it was, it was not infinite, it was finite.

Justin:

It was an encyclopedia.

Sydnee:

Right. It was an encyclopedia.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

There are 37 books in Natural History. And it, like I said, it covers a huge variety of topics, including, of course, one book devoted entirely, uh, to how best to throw a spear from the back of a horse, 'cause he was really into that.

Uh, but there were, and you can find all this, by the way, you can find the entirety of Natural History online, I search it constantly when we're doing our show to, like, look for, what did Pliny say about this disease, or this treatment or whatever.

Um, 'cause it's all available publicly, which is cool, um, for me, anyway. [laughs] I don't know about for you, but for me, it's cool. Um, and many of the books in it are titled things like, Remedies Derived From, and then The Forest Trees, or Living Creatures, or Aquatic Animals, or whatever.

Um, there are some that are titled by, like, the remedy first. So it's like, anise, 61 remedies with anise, or dill, nine remedies. So, like, so that you could search it either way, you know, which is really useful, for me when I'm doing my medicine now.

Justin:

Right.

[audience laughs]

Sydney:

There are 35 remedies derived from wool, which was amazing to me, like, that's a whole chapter, like here are 35 things you can do with wool to cure you.

Justin:

Kind of a fun, it's more like a, uh, a Good Housekeeping article.

[audience laughs]

Sydney:

And they're wide ranging, like, he was covering everything, like, the anise one, which is lengthy, because there's 61 remedies. It includes things as diverse as, like, scorpion stings, uh, bad breath, low appetite, and bad dreams. So any of those things.

Justin:

So anything you want to do with wool, the options there for you.

Sydney:

Now, some other things Pliny said in his book, if he were alive today, um, aside from being, I think, very flattered by all this, I have to say. Uh, he would not like me very much. He was not a fan of physicians at all.

Um, he, in book 29, chapter eight, which is titled, Evils Attendant Upon the Practice of Medicine. [laughs] He says, "it is at the expense of our perils that

they learn and they experimentalize by putting us to death, a physician being the only person that can kill another with sovereign impunity."

[audience laughs]

Justin:

I mean, like, okay, back then, though, he had a point.

Sydnee:

No—

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Like, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Nobody knows anything. I'm with Pliny on this one.

Sydnee:

Well, not now.

Justin:

You guys are cool now, for sure. Love it. House, Mash, big fan. But like, back then? For sure. For sure. For sure. For sure. Don't go to doctors.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Which I think is where this impulse to, like, not just tell people about the natural world, but to say, "And also you can use that for this." I think that's where that came from, was this like, distrust, like, doctors don't know what they're doing.

I'm gonna give the medical knowledge to the people, which is like a cool impulse, like, I'm going to put this book out there and it's going to tell you how you can use wool to fix you. You don't have to go to your doctor because they'll kill you and they won't be held accountable.

So, some highlights from Natural History, because that's always our favorite thing to do, is talk about all the silly stuff that Pliny recommended. So, for instance, for a toothache, uh, Pliny would recommend that you take a hippopotamus's left tooth. I don't know how you're gonna get that.

Justin:

Psh, very carefully.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Hippos don't like that, I bet. I don't know, I stay away from them. Um, and you're gonna rub it in your mouth, for your toothache. If you survive all that, you probably won't care about your toothache. Uh, if you didn't want to do that, you could take a wolf's head, like, off the wolf first.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

Separate it, and then you want to reduce it to ash. I mean, you can figure that part out. And then you can eat that.

Justin:

Yeah, that's a really good Game of Thrones episode I just ...

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Pliny had a lot to say about teeth. He said for that, you could take the filth of the tail of a sheep.

Justin:

What?

Sydnee:

And use that to strengthen your teeth and your stomach, I guess.

Justin:

I will keep my weak teeth, thank you.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

I'm good. [theme music plays] [ad break]

Sydnee:

Mice head bones, like, the bones from a mouse's head, were good for toothpicks. [laughs] And if you could capture a lizard, uh, during a full moon, the bones from the front part, I don't know what front part, just the front part of the lizard. Anatomically speaking, we're good for that. But don't use vulture quills.

Justin:

Oh, no?

Sydnee:

They cause bad breath.

Justin:

Oh.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Should've guessed.

Sydnee:

Yeah. You could try porcupine instead.

Justin:

And I will.

Sydnee:

They're fine. Yeah.

Justin:

Yeah, that sounds great.

Sydnee:

Um, we've done a whole episode on hangovers before, but I think I might have missed this one. For hangovers, he recommends a deep fried canary?

[audience laughs]

Justin:

I mean, probably, right? If you're hungover today, tomorrow, think about, like, you know what I could go for, for sure?

Sydnee:

Uh ... [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

For hemorrhoids, which were a problem then, too, uh, you could make a cream out of pig lard. Sure, and you also need some rust from chariot wheels.

Justin:

Okay.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Where do we draw the line between this and witchcraft? Like, these are spells. They're basically spells, at this point.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Or you could just use an onion as a suppository.

Justin:

Okay. Okay. No. What? I didn't— Sorry, it took me a while to line up, like, my basic geometry and absolutely not. [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

And now Pliny, he was, like, an equal opportunity offender. [laughs] Uh, I don't know, however you want to put it. But he was worried about us ladies, as well. And for all of our female complaints, whatever those may be.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

You just take some ram's wool and steep it in oil and then put it there.

Justin:

I could use that. Sydnee's got a lot of female complaints about me. If you know what I'm saying, fellas. Waka waka. I did my best. Sorry.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

That good— Are you done with those jokes, now? Or— Is that out of your system?

Justin:

All used up. All used em up.

Sydnee:

Now, wool, as I mentioned, he had a lot of uses for that. If you didn't, if you didn't have female complaints...

Justin:

And I don't.

Sydnee:

Then perhaps you just have general pains in your loins.

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

Uh, what you could do with that wool is steep it in a mixture of boiling niter, sulfur, oil, vinegar, tar and apply that twice a day as warm as possible to your loins. The pain will be gone.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

That's just for you.

Justin:

Oh, great. Sure. I'll whip that one up.

Sydnee:

He has an entire chapter, book 29, chapter 20: Remedies Derived from Dragons.

Justin:

Okay.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

What in the heck? Man, I wish I could curse. What in the heck? Dragons?

Sydnee:

Dragons. I—

Justin:

I'll be, uh, funny enough, more plentiful today than Encarta, ironically.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

I'm assuming this is a, this term was used for other animals that weren't, 'cause like he talks about it like he's done it. Like he's used these things. So, there were something he's calling a dragon.

Justin:

That's kind of Pliny, though. Pliny in a nutshell.

Sydnee:

But he could take— You could take its eyes, dry them, and then beat them with some honey. You know, like you would with, like, scrambled eggs and beat them with some honey and then you can make a liniment, and that's really good against, like, ghosts. [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin:

So, Pliny the Elder has basically become a D&D character at this point, right? He's basically, like, the old guy who works at the apothecary.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Now, as long as you've captured a dragon and killed it, why not use all parts of the Dragon?

Justin:

Sure. That's... Anything else to be wasteful.

Sydnee:

Uh, its fat is good at repelling venomous creatures. Now, to be fair—

Justin:

I heard somebody in the audience go, "Huh."

[audience laughs]

Justin:

What is wrong with you? Dragons!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

I'm gonna write this down.

Justin:

Salient and germane, hm.

Sydnee:

I don't like snakes at all.

Justin:

I don't like snakes now that that lady mentions it.

Sydnee:

But he does mention, like, there's like, a footnote. And he's like, well, I mean, yes, that is how you could repel snakes, but that might be hard for you to get, the dragon fat.

So instead, you could take some vinegar and put it on some, like, stinging nettles. And then rub those all over your skin. And snakes won't want to bite you then either.

Justin:

Probably not. Probably a little choosier than that.

Sydnee:

Well, 'cause they're gonna be, they're gonna think you're like, scary crazy. They're gonna be like, "Whoa."

Justin:

Whoa.

Sydnee:

Whoa.

Justin:

"Whoa, check that guy."

Sydnee:

"Look at that guy, did you see what he just did? I'm not getting close to that guy."

Justin:

"He's a nut."

Sydnee:

Um, for the care of cataract, if you have cataracts, you could use the ashes of a weasel. Assuming you have those, um, other cures for the eyes specifically for glaucoma. You could take some partridge eggs, and then you boil those in a copper vessel and add some honey and that's perfect for your glaucoma.

Justin:

Oh, good. Okay.

Sydnee:

So, that's not too bad. Now, if you have lice, which was, again, that was a problem then, and it's a problem now. What you want to do for the nits, and what I'm usually telling people are like, you got to get all the nits out. You got to comb, get all the nits out. Nope, you can destroy them by using dog's fat or eat a snake that was cooked like an eel.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

Sorry, what?

Sydnee:

I don't know how you cook an eel. So, I guess that's step one. Step one.

Justin:

It's like eel-fried snake, basically.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs] Step one, how do you cook an eel? They don't have that on Encarta.

Justin:

No, not on Encarta.

Sydnee:

Now, you may be wondering, how did old Pliny die? He published this book, and it was very— And like I said, it was kind of the beginning of, like, what we think of as encyclopedias at this point. So, it was, like, a big deal.

And he really did, he, I'm making fun of kind of his cures, but he cataloged basically everything in the natural world and told all kinds of human histories as well. Um, the way that Pliny died, might be kind of heroic. Maybe. We're not sure.

Um, so, he sailed a ship to Pompeii... People are going, "Hm, Pompeii. I know that," during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, because one of his friends was stuck there.

Justin:

Whoa.

Sydnee:

And he was trying to save his friend Rectina and her family from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Justin:

Wow.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

It's very nice. I'm sure he appreciates that. You may want to let her finish the story.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

I read ahead a bit. [laughs]

Sydnee:

There are multiple accounts of this, as you may imagine. Um, and the most common story goes that when he got there, the winds were so strong back towards, you know, Pompeii that he wasn't able to sail away from Pompeii. And so they died there, um, and weren't able to sail away.

And that, and like, his friends had, like, people advised him like, "Turn back, don't go." and he was like, "Fortune favors the brave." And then he took off. So like, that's, like, his heroic ending. That's, like, the good. It's like another Wayne's World thing. This is the heroic ending. [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, unfortunately, there were other versions of this story. So, one version hinges on the fact, and you may be surprised to hear, Pliny was not, like, a healthy guy. Um, he apparently was in pretty bad shape.

Like, he had a bad heart. His lungs didn't work so well. Um, something. I don't know, but anyway, he may have gotten there and had a heart attack. Or he may have had a heart attack in the boat on the way there. Or there's one story that says he never even left, like, he talked about it. [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

And he said, like, "I'm gonna, in a minute I'm gonna go save... Just 10 minutes. I gotta have lunch first. And then I'm gonna go save my buddy and her family and, oh, my heart." So there's also that version.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So we don't know.

Justin:

I'm gonna choose to believe the first one. Perception is reality. He went there, he saved her, died a hero.

Sydnee:

Yeah, I'm gonna give Pliny, I'm gonna give Pliny the benefit of doubt and say that he did. He died a hero trying to save his friend in Pompeii.

Justin:

Hooray for Pliny.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So...

[audience cheers]

Justin:

Hooray.

Sydnee:

Now, Pliny deserves, I think, more than just a story. Uh, what's more poignant than a story, but a story told in song? That's how I feel about it.

Justin:

Yeah, for sure.

Sydnee:

So, where's your guitar?

Justin:

Uh...

[audience laughs]

Justin: Um, I know you told me to bring it. It's so heavy. It's so heavy.

Sydnee:

I wrote this whole song about Pliny.

Justin:

Hold on, I got... Wait, hold on. I got you. I got my Anna and Elsa cup here.

Sydnee:

You have a cup?

Justin:

My Anna and Elsa cup.

Sydnee:

What are you gonna do with that cup?

Justin:

Stole it from Charlie.

Sydnee:

What is your plan with this cup? Oh, no. Rileigh taught him how to do this.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee:

That's true.

Justin:

It's gonna go great.

Sydnee:

That's 100% true.

[audience laughs]

Justin:

[playing the cup game, making a beat] Whenever you're ready, Syd.

Sydnee:

[singing to the tune of When I'm Gone (Cup Song)] I bought a tincture from this guy in town. Two bottle urine and some hay, and I sure hope it can cure pleurisy 'cause Pliny says refunds aren't his way.

It's all wrong. It's all wrong. I'm drinking pee and it's all wrong. I'm gonna eat a fox's brain and feel exactly the same, 'cause Pliny the Elder's always

wrong. It's all wrong. It's all wrong. Bad blood on snake bites. No, that's wrong. He told me I should lick a snail and that my period stops hail, 'cause Pliny the Elder's always wrong.

So yeah, my pleurisy still got me down. But Pliny says he's got great news. He's got maggots. He's got livers. He's got rabbit poop for shivers, and a buy one get one sale. I just can't lose.

But it's wrong. It's all wrong. A BOGO sale on stuff that's wrong. Sure, he's offering great deals, if you don't care if you're healed, 'cause Pliny the Elder's always wrong. It's all wrong. It's all wrong. It's true that Pliny's always wrong.

Sydnee and Justin:

[singing] But he helped to pave the way and died a hero in Pompeii. There are way worse things to be than wrong.

Justin:

Thanks, everybody. We'll be back in 15 minutes. Thank you so much, New York. My name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

As always, don't drill a hole in your head!

[theme music plays]