

## **A New Angle**

### **Episode 53**

**July 7, 2022**

**Justin Angle:** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle:** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Since we deal with some pretty weighty topics here at A New Angle, I thought it was time for some comic relief. So, I'm excited to bring you today's guest, Sarah Aswell.

**Sarah Aswell:** Comedy is this amazing tool that can bring people together or divide them. If you can make somebody laugh, you can make them listen to you.

**Sarah Aswell:** Sarah is a writer of many stripes and a stand-up comedian. She is a senior editor at Scary Mommy and has published her writing in prominent outlets like The New Yorker, McSweeney's, Forbes, Mad Magazine and many others. She lives here in Missoula and performs around the country. Sarah, thanks for coming on the show.

**Sarah Aswell:** Thanks for having me.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**Sarah Aswell:** I grew up outside of Boston, Massachusetts.

**Justin Angle:** What town?

**Sarah Aswell:** I started growing up in Duxbury.

**Justin Angle:** Okay.

**Sarah Aswell:** And I finished growing up in Dover-Sherborn, which is two really small towns that are next to each other.

**Justin Angle:** With three sort of names. Dover-Sherborn.

**Sarah Aswell:** Yes. Hyphenated.

**Justin Angle:** And your parents?

**Justin Angle:** My parents are both microbiologists. My dad was a research scientist. My mom was, too. Then she had kids and came back and was a professor. So, I come from scientists. I was supposed to be a doctor. That did not happen. I went a different way. Yeah.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. So, tell us about that way. How did you make your way to Montana, of all places?

**Sarah Aswell:** I went to college at Grinnell, which is in Iowa. It's a small liberal arts college, and I started majoring in biology to make my parents happy.

**Justin Angle:** Sure.

**Sarah Aswell:** But at the same time, I started writing for the newspaper, and I had a little humor column. And I loved doing that way more than math and science.

**Justin Angle:** Sure.

**Sarah Aswell:** And one day, I failed a calculus test, and the professor called me into his office and sat me down and put a newspaper in front of me and pointed at my column and said, you should be doing this.

**Justin Angle:** Wow. Yeah.

**Sarah Aswell:** I was like, I think he's right.

**Justin Angle:** That's a gutsy thing to do. I sort of would hesitate to do that as a professor now, but I could see how great a utility you could have, especially if you tend to be, if you're correct in the assessment.

**Sarah Aswell:** It's very important that you're right.

**Justin Angle:** Exactly. It's a risky, risky move.

**Sarah Aswell:** For sure. But I went in, I changed my major, and I started concentrating on writing fully. Then I worked on the Grinnell newspaper in town for a year. I work for a small-town newspaper, super old school, old printing press. No internet in the office

type situation. And then after that, I applied to creative writing schools and came to the University of Montana.

**Justin Angle:** Okay.

**Sarah Aswell:** Yeah.

**Justin Angle:** Attributable to the program itself, this was where you wanted to be?

**Sarah Aswell:** Yeah, I just applied to the top four in the country, and I only got into one, so.

**Justin Angle:** Here we are. Yeah. So. And now, I mean, you kind of write in all spaces. I mean, you do some writing for hire, you do creative writing, you do humor, commentary, your stand up. And tell us about how you kind of have put together a portfolio of writing engagements.

**Sarah Aswell:** Okay. So, after I went to school here, I thought that I wanted to be and go into publishing. Book publishing. So, I moved to New York City and I got a job in

book publishing, which, looking back, someone described it as wanting to be a firefighter and going and working at a fire truck factory instead of being a firefighter.

**Justin Angle:** That's a pretty good analogy.

**Sarah Aswell:** Yeah, right. I did not like working in a fire truck factory at all. I hated it. It was the worst. I didn't even like living in New York City, honestly. I was too poor to do anything there. It was very loud and crowded. I'm a pretty introverted, quiet person with like sensory issues. It was so bad. So, I started freelancing from my office and was able to quit pretty quickly and started a freelance writing business. And I did that for about 13 years and started writing at the very bottom of like literal personal injury attorney copy. You know, if you've been injured and blah, blah, blah. I've written like thousands of those articles, but then started expanding out to other things and ended up writing for places like Nike and KitchenAid and cool places that were doing interesting things.

**Justin Angle:** Big brands. And I mean, you said your first writing for the student newspaper at Grinnell was a humor column. Has humor always been kind of a central motivation for you?

**Sarah Aswell:** I lost my humor writing for a long time. After I graduated, in college I wrote for the paper. I ran the, I was the first female editor in chief of the humor magazine there. I was the, I don't know captain of the improv troop?

**Justin Angle:** Is there a Capitan? Is there a head? Leader?

**Sarah Aswell:** There must be a name. And it was such a huge part of my life. And then when I went to school here, I think I had in my mind that I needed to be a serious writer. I needed to put away the toys and be serious.

**Justin Angle:** And did that come from instructors or was that just the sense you had?

**Sarah Aswell:** It was a sense I had that I wanted, there was such pressure on me. You know, my parents said that I would never make a living writing. And I was took that very seriously as a challenge. And they're very supportive, don't get me wrong. But in that moment, they thought it was a big mistake.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah.

**Sarah Aswell:** So, I took it very seriously and I didn't write any humor. Big mistake. I think I produced very bad writing at the graduate program here. And then I got married and had kids and continued to not produce any humor writing at all and lost myself, I think, you know. And then when my youngest was six months old, which and this is about six years ago, seven years ago now, my husband was out with friends at a bar and he called me and he said, there's an open mic comedy thing going on here and I dare you to do it next month when it happens. We're all going to do it, he's going to do it, I'm going to do it and our third friend is going to do it. So, I did stand up a month later, you know, with my boobs leaking milk all over the place and my baby at home with a babysitter. And it changed everything. It reopened my mind to comedy. And from there I just started writing and haven't stopped.

**Justin Angle:** And so how did you prepare for that first stand up or did you prepare?

**Sarah Aswell:** I did, yeah. So, at that point, I was freelancing basically when my kids were asleep. I had very little childcare support and the only quiet time I ever had was walking my kids around the block. So, I just walked them around with the stroller and thought and performed it in my head for a month.

**Justin Angle:** And what, you know, tell us about you're thinking like, what's funny mean to you? How do you know something's funny? How do you choose to think about a topic?

**Sarah Aswell:** Like we've talked about, I'm the child of scientists. I approach humor really scientifically. I think about, oh, there are 12 types of humor. There's misdirection, there's wordplay, there's exaggeration. But with that being said, I think I know something's funny when it connects to people, when two people have a moment where they feel not alone.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. Could we, like, break down a joke, talk about, like, how you observe something and think, okay, that has the potential for a good joke and walk us through how it unfolded.

**Sarah Aswell:** So observational comedy, I think the example that I give in my workshops a lot is a Jerry Seinfeld joke that goes, your first birthday's a lot like your last birthday. You just kind of sit there.

**Justin Angle:** That's pretty good.

**Sarah Aswell:** Right? It's really just a way of looking at something from a slightly different angle than other people do. I mean, everyone knows that's kind of true, but to put that, that's got a clever structure, right? Clever word structure that makes it funnier and it's got that seed of truth in the middle of it. Right. It also has a little bit, one of the types of comedy is shock comedy. Right. So, shock comedy, I think a lot of new comedians use shock comedy a lot because it's very easy to shock your audience until laughter. You can just be offensive if you want. Right. The Jerry Seinfeld joke has just this hint, this touch of shock comedy because you're thinking about death in this joke, right? It's about the circle of life. It's about how on your way out, if you're lucky to get to old age, you're just going to be sitting in a chair and drooling.

**Justin Angle:** And it's not a very positive message.

**Sarah Aswell:** Right. Not participating in your birthday. It's kind of sad and dark and shocking, but that makes it funny because there's just a touch of it and it goes along with these other types of humor, the observation and then the poetic structure of the line.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, that poetic structure piece is interesting. And I've heard Seinfeld talk about, you know, his process of like getting it down to the rhythm in the syllable and like, how big a role does that play, the syntax play in your writing?

**Sarah Aswell:** To go back to what I was talking about, some people plan on a lot and some people don't. In the comedy world, we talk about there being two types of comedians. There's the clown and then there's the editor. Both of them are amazing. Most people are in the middle and you're supposed to kind of work toward whatever other end from the one where you are. Okay, so I'm like way over on the editor side. Sure. I take things very carefully. When you think about a clown, you might think about Robin Williams or Jim Carrey.

**Justin Angle:** Kind of the physical comedian.

**Sarah Aswell:** Right. And very off the cuff. Very like interacting with their audience or interacting with their space, using their bodies. The editor is very carefully worded, like Maria Bamford or Mitch Hedberg. These are the comedians who carefully think about every single word, which is what I do in my process as a writer. And, you know, in my day job, I'm literally an editor. It's no surprise that that happens. But it's a constant

struggle to, like, go more toward clown for me and find that balance better in the clowns struggle to get over to my side.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. I mean, how do you kind of play with that in your in your performing?

**Sarah Aswell:** So, I used to write every single word down, and I still do to some extent write every word down. And then I record my set. And after the performance, I listen to my set while I'm reading the transcript and I highlight every time somebody, the audience laughs. And then I look at the paper and see where we have deserts without highlighting. That's bad. And they say in the comedy world, you're supposed to make the audience laugh every 15 to 20 seconds.

**Justin Angle:** Sure.

**Sarah Aswell:** Which is a lot. So, then I fill in those holes, and I do that either through punching up or through editing out long, dry spells. And I do that over and over again throughout the shows. So, that's very editing oriented.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, I mean, it's technical, but it makes some sense. I think it was, it might have been Chris Rock, who said something about this, this timing of laughs. And as you get better as a comedian, you can have longer gaps in between. The laughs or maybe bigger, but like the audience will give you more time, more rope, essentially, to set your joke up and maybe sneak in some social commentary or maybe the entire thing is social commentary but develop an idea more fully without having to rely on a laugh to link things together.

**Sarah Aswell:** Right. Like a huge part of stand up is building up authority with your audience. Right. Reading the room and then getting the audience on your side. And the more quickly you can do that and the more, more strongly that you can do that, the more room you have to play around, right? The more risks you can take, the more edgy you can be, the more time you can take. When you get to Chris Rock's level, he's coming in with a huge amount of authority. People have already seen as old specials. People feel like they're his friend, you know, and he can do a lot that, you know, when you're an unknown comedian doing five minutes at an open mic, there's a lot more work to do.

**Justin Angle:** Mm hmm. What's your strategy for getting the audience to kind of give you authority and respect?

**Sarah Aswell:** It kind of goes against logic. But I think the biggest thing and one of the things that I think is most central to comedy generally is vulnerability. You know, just showing yourself and making yourself real for them. I see a lot of new comedians come in and they want to immediately establish themselves as super cool or better than everyone. And it's because they are so vulnerable that they can't.

**Justin Angle:** They can't be vulnerable.

**Sarah Aswell:** Right, they have this right shell. So, I think it's important to, first of all, connect with the audience. As soon as you get on stage to connect with them. And you'll see professional comedians do this, they say, how are you doing tonight? It seems dumb, right? But you're engaging with the audience right off the bat. And then to show yourself, you know, and maybe it's a self-deprecating joke, maybe it's just something that you're sharing that is personal, something to get them on your side so that you can show them around without them being defensive or you don't want them frightened of the next thing you're going to say.

**Justin Angle:** We'll be back to my conversation with Sarah Aswell after this short break.

**Sarah Aswell\_bseg.wav**

**Justin Angle:** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Sarah Aswell about comedy and writing.

**Justin Angle:** You know, you mentioned punching down before and it'd be interesting to talk about that concept and the power dynamics at play, whether you're punching up or punching down, you know, showing truth to power, all those sort of dynamics.

**Sarah Aswell:** So, I never punch down. I try not to punch down. You know, and I think it's something that I've learned over the years. The second time I ever did standup comedy at an open mic, I had written this really funny joke in my mind. And I don't remember what the joke is at this point, but I know that the punch line had something to do with a peg leg, and I thought it was hilarious. Yeah. And I was so excited to perform it. And I got to the venue and sitting in the front row is an amputee. Right. And it was such a learning moment for me because I wasn't thinking about my audience. And that's just the number one rule in comedy, is to think about your audience, to know your room. When I wrote that joke, I wasn't writing that joke for him. I was writing it for me.

**Justin Angle:** Right.

**Sarah Aswell:** It was a big moment for me. And at that point, I understood that every joke I tell, I need to be thinking about my audience and who's going to hear that joke.

**Justin Angle:** Does that mean you think everybody needs to think something is funny equally or that, you know, how do you think about like the distribution of humor within a group that's pretty know heterogeneous.

**Sarah Aswell:** No, not everybody's going to find something funny. I don't know if you watched Hannah Gadsby's special, Nanette.

**Justin Angle:** I haven't seen it. No.

**Sarah Aswell:** Yeah, you should watch it. But a lot of women found that extremely funny. And a lot of men, their response was, that wasn't a standup special. That wasn't even, that wasn't even a standup special. That's how like far, far divided. And it wasn't, you know, perfectly divided. But the material was written for women and about things that women understood that men might not. So, no, not every joke's going to be for

everybody. Not every audience is the same. Not every situation's the same. It's something that you have to think about every time you step on stage, you know? A few months ago, I went to a show, and I noticed that like 40% of the audience was wearing steel toed boots and hoodies and were big, huge men. And I was like, huh?

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. What can you learn from that?

**Sarah Aswell:** So, I went over to one of them and I was like, hi, what's going on? And he was like, oh, it's the Pipefitters union is here tonight. So, when something like that happens, I have to change my whole set. I'm not going to tell them a bunch of jokes about my period, not because they're going to get offended necessarily, but because there's not going to be that that understanding or interest.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

**Sarah Aswell:** So, you kind of have to meet in the middle. Like there's jokes that I like talking about and things that I like exploring. And then there are things that my audience is interested in and I have to find out. It's a Venn diagram. I have to find what's in the middle every time I walk into a room.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. In your mind, like how have the guardrails or rules of the game changed or have they? I mean, you hear some comedians say like, oh, I'm not going to touch that issue because it's too toxic right now. Maybe that's the symptom of somebody who has made a career in punching down. But it seems like even with punching up, there's things like Michelle Wolf at the White House Correspondents Dinner several years ago. I mean, that seems like the important venue for a comedian to punch up and really challenge authority in some ways. But even within that context, there seems to be more criticism for being edgy or maybe shocking in ways that weren't as tolerable before.

**Sarah Aswell:** Why people are being edgy and shocking is really important. What are they trying to accomplish? Right. Comedy is this amazing tool that can bring people together or divide them. Right. If you can make somebody laugh, you can make them listen to you. You can talk about subjects that might be scary or hurtful in an easier way. Right. But why are you doing it? A pure, purely, you know, we call these comedians Edge Lords that try to, you know, walk this line between offending and not offending people. Like, what are they trying to do? A lot of it to me is comedians that don't know how to kind of level up to the type of humor that's being told right now. Like I did a show recently with a comedian who used to tour in the nineties, right. An older guy and he toured with some big names and was popular and he got on stage

and you know, the first joke he told was about how he didn't like his wife, which had its place and its time. But that just feels stale.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, that time's passed. Yeah.

**Sarah Aswell:** Yeah. And it's part of comedy history, but also the audience has changed. Back then you were doing those jokes to an audience of middle-aged men who might be tired of their wives. Now the audience is totally different. You know, I was at Missoula's Pride Show last night, and that's a good example. We had 16 queer comedians doing comedy for 200 queer people. That script is going to look a lot different than some of the other audiences we've had in the past.

**Justin Angle:** Maybe that's a good opportunity to talk about your Revival Comedy workshops. You do a lot of work too, to kind of get underrepresented voices opportunities in comedy.

**Sarah Aswell:** When I started doing comedy, I was often the only woman on the ticket. I was often the only person of color on the ticket, the only queer person on the ticket. And that could get old pretty fast, you know, I would be introduced as and now the only woman performing tonight, Sarah Aswell. It was old and I hated it. And it hurt the

audience too, because what kind of audiences go out to see seven straight white men and a woman perform? So, I started this workshop to get more marginalized voices on the scene. I was feeling kind of hopeless on sort of a national stage, and I was like, okay. What are my skills and how can I use them on a local level to make things just a tiny bit better? And the answer was getting more women and trans people and non-binary people on the stage. So, it's a monthly workshop. It still happens. It happens at the Roxy at 5:30 p.m. every first Tuesday of the month. And it's followed by an open mic that prioritizes marginalized voices. And through that, there have been so many new comics on the scene, it's really changed both the comedy scene and the audience that shows up to see comedy. I was surprised at the women who started showing up at the workshop. You know, one of the questions I ask is, you know why are you here? And I thought it would be one type of person, but it was so many different types of women with so many different goals from so many different backgrounds. You know, I had a senior woman come and say, I'm here because I've never heard a menopause joke told on stage.

**Justin Angle:** Interesting.

**Sarah Aswell:** You know, and that was so great for me. I've had women come and say, I'm processing my sexual assault and I talk to my therapist. And she suggested coming

into this workshop and working through because she was like, you know, I joke about it in therapy and my therapist said, you know, that's not wrong or unhealthy. That's the way that you are getting through this and getting to see her perform her jokes on stage has been really powerful for me.

**Justin Angle:** With the proliferation of media, so many different streaming outlets, so many different podcasts, so many different web platforms, certainly it has opened up a market mechanism for entertainers or creators and audience to find each other more effectively.

**Sarah Aswell:** It's been absolutely huge. Tik tok, YouTube, has been huge for marginalized voices. I can't state it enough. And you know, people get to choose who they find and who they watch. One of the many problems with how standup worked before is that, you know, 94% of bookers are male. How many club owners are male and how many of those people know how it's worked since the nineties or the eighties?

**Justin Angle:** And when they say know how it's worked, it probably means like, how have they made their business run? How have they sort of responded to the incentives placed in front of them? Whether you're a booker like, you have to book a room, fill a

room, get all the revenue there, if your club, you've got to sell all the seats. And you might not exactly be thinking explicitly about what the composition of that audience is or the performers, but it sort of if you're doing the same thing over and over again because it has worked, you're not going to be open to change.

**Sarah Aswell:** Exactly. And there does need to be change. You know, a lot of women, it's different when they tour. It's different if they have kids. You know, people say, oh, it's so silly to talk about safe spaces or to think about accommodations for people who might be different. But it can be scary to be a trans person on stage and not have, for example, a separate entrance and exit out of the club so that they can leave. And that's something that a straight male booker might not think about when they're booking shows.

**Justin Angle:** In their remaining time. What's your Mount Rushmore of comedy and why would you select these folks?

**Sarah Aswell:** Oh, my God, that's tough. I'd say Eddie Izzard is the person who I think has been the biggest influence on my comedy. I would say Dave Barry, he was a humor columnist when I was growing up. Maria Bamford, I think everyone should know about. She's hilarious and she's also this enormous force of good in the comedy world. She's

known for paying her openers out of her own pocket and doing a lot of stuff to sort of, we were talking about how, you know, the comedy club world hasn't changed. She's doing a lot of that change and being totally hilarious. And then Ali Wong, I think recently has been huge for me, especially as an Asian-American. Seeing her success as a mom, too, with small kids, sort of getting to the top has been really exciting to watch.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. If there are listeners out there who you maybe have lost touch with a form of creative energy that was important to them. As you said, you lost touch with your comedy writing for a while, like how would you encourage people to find that part of themselves again?

**Sarah Aswell:** Well, you need to go to a bar and perform comedy. You know, it's such a stale advice. But I think it goes back to remembering what made you happy when you were younger. And keeping in touch with that. I think I pushed away the things that brought me joy because I wanted to be a serious adult, I wanted to have a career, and I wanted to succeed and seem like a real adult.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. What is a real adult by the way? I have no idea.

**Sarah Aswell:** But the secret to finding that success? I started being successful, truly, when I started going to seedy bars and doing standup at night because that's where my joy was. That's what led me to being published in The New Yorker and Mad Magazine and McSweeney's. It all came from that joy that I got from going to the bars and telling jokes.

**Justin Angle:** Was it that first experience that, you know, when you were called to that open mic night and bet to do it, that you felt that joy right away?

**Sarah Aswell:** Immediately like I got off the stage...

**Justin Angle:** And it must have been coupled with like tremendous fear too. But maybe that that adds to it.

**Sarah Aswell:** Yeah. And you know, I'm very shy and introverted and I didn't think that standup would be for me, but. It was exactly right. And I knew it on stage.

**Justin Angle:** Well, Sarah, where would you point people online who want to learn more about you and your work?

**Sarah Aswell:** And you can follow Revival Comedy on Facebook or Instagram, or you can follow me, Sarah Aswell, seaswell, on Instagram for all show updates across Montana.

**Justin Angle:** Awesome. Well, it was. It's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us today.

**Sarah Aswell:** Thank you for having me.

**Justin Angle:** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle:** A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, social media by Aj Williams and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.