JULIAN BOON: THE REAL CRACKER

An encounter with one of Britain's leading forensic psychologists.

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The Warwickshire Constabulary's headquarters at Leek Wootton resembles something between a minor public school and a country club. A leafy avenue leads to a down-on-its-luck manor house surrounded by token lawns and a rabble of modern outbuildings; only the stern notices cautioning against parking on the verge, and a series of small mounds where a SWAT team of moles has been on underground manoeuvres, hints that this is a control-and-command centre in the struggle of law against disorder.

'Are you harassing?' asks the receptionist cheerfully. Indeed we are. Some 90 of us – policemen, social workers, journalists, psychiatric nurses – have gathered for a one-day seminar on stalking and harassment. The PCs are in shirt-sleeves, the social workers are in baggy jumpers, and the detectives – hard-looking men whose party trick is probably to crack walnuts with their teeth – are in dark, nondescript jackets which would allow them to slip unnoticed along the aisles of British Home Stores.

Among the speakers they have come to hear is Dr Julian Boon, a lecturer in forensic psychology. Boon, who has worked with the police on such cases as the Shipman murders, is an expert in 'offender profiling' – that is, in extrapolating from the facts of a crime what sort of person has committed it. It is this science (though some regard it as more of a lucky dip) that Robbie Coltrane's character Fitz practised so memorably in the television series *Cracker*.

Since there are only twenty police-accredited offender profilers in Britain, few of the audience have come across one before. It is clear,

however, that anyone expecting a corpulent, rumbustious, unkempt Scotsman is going to be disappointed. Though veering towards plumpness, the 41-year-old Dr Boon – wearing an immaculate grey, double-breasted chalk-stripe suit – looks like an advertisement for Weightwatchers in comparison to Coltrane. His light brown hair, swept across his forehead and curling over his ears and collar, evokes memories of the young William Haig at his first Tory Party conference, and there is something about him which is at once schoolmasterly and boyish, authoritative and eager to please.

What surprises his audience most, however, is his manner of speech, which owes not a little to P.G. Wodehouse. (Appropriately, Mills & Boon, the company started by his grandfather, published Wodehouse's early works.) He begins by apologising for the fact that he must leave as soon as the lecture is over, 'Like Captain Von Trapp and family, with car waiting outside.' He goes on to define a forensic psychiatrist as 'the animal that can put them in the rubber room'; love, he tells us, is 'the delightful interval between meeting a beautiful girl and discovering that she looks like a haddock'.

The subject of the talk is how to categorise different kinds of stalking and harassment. We are introduced to four types: 'ex', 'infatuation', 'delusional', and 'sadistic'. 'Ex' (accounting for half of all cases) involves former lovers or spouses; 'infatuation' means that the stalker can think of nothing else ('A bird flies past the window: "Ah Edna, my beloved Edna, the freedom of that bird reminds me of your free spirit!" '); in 'delusional', the stalker is convinced that his feelings are reciprocated; while 'sadistic' is less to do with whips and chains than with a desire to control every aspect of the victim's life. Boon dwells particularly on the latter.

He speaks fluently, with sweeping movements of his hands, and it is no surprise that he once considered a career as a barrister. The civilians are in stitches at his jokes – or perhaps one should call them *Boon mots* – and even the hard detectives break into wry smiles. But if he is entertaining, Boon is also extremely persuasive, and by the end few can be in any doubt that psychology is crucial in handling these crimes. We learn that 25 per cent of cases involve attempted murder; that stalkers have been known to 'swap' victims in jail, as if belonging to some demented stamp-collectors' club; that one man succeeded in terrorising 30 women simultaneously.

Afterwards, Boon is pleased with his morning's work. He has even learnt of a new type of stalking from one of the policemen in the audience: 'There's someone – a taxi-driver, or a long-distance lorry-driver, perhaps – who's been sending text messages to children all over the country, persuading them to do disgusting things. What a world we live in, eh?

He climbs into his car – a blue Rover 75, registration number JWB1 – and drives away.

The entrance to Leicester University, where Dr Boon is based, stands – perhaps appropriately – opposite a graveyard. On the morning of my visit, a chiffon-thin scarf of mist hangs over the granite obelisks, Celtic crosses, miniature pavilions and ivy-strangled trees – all the panoply of death – as if expecting the imminent arrival of Nosferatu the Vampyre in a Mr Cabbie radiohearse.

Boon's office is a functional white cube, of which the main feature is a Formica desk. The personal touches are few: an antique black telephone and green-shaded brass table lamp, a florid drawing by one of his children, a handful of faculty photographs. More promisingly, a bottle of

champagne protrudes from among the psychology textbooks, while a copy of *Three Men in a Boat* lies close at hand.

Boon declines, for reasons of police secrecy, to give details of the first crime that he worked on, but it is tempting – with a lack of methodology which would horrify him – to make a connection with a poster on his office wall appealing for information about a horse-ripper. What he will say is this:

'In the early Nineties, there were a series of attacks going down. They were bizarre, they were outraging, and I gently fired off a letter to the incident room saying that I thought there was something psychology might be able to tell them. I later found out that they had up to 100 similar offers, from everybody from psychiatrists to Madame Rosa at the end of the pier, and I was the only one who didn't roll my sleeves up in an overconfident way.' When he was invited to work on the case, 'It turned out that my contribution was "of immense benefit" and caused the whole thing to be seen in a different light.

'I won't comment further, except to say that when you do something, other policemen come round the corner and say, "While you're here, will you look at…?" and you find yourself in the middle of a very big snowball indeed. And loads of cases later, here you see the bruised, battered, beaten Boon before you.'

As Channel 4's new series *The Real Cracker* makes clear, the perception of offender profilers created by Robbie Coltrane's Fitz is far from the truth. Julian Boon does not hang around police stations like part of the furniture, appear instantly at the scene of the crime, grill suspects, or solve cases by flashes of inspiration. He is called in by the police only when other possibilities have been exhausted, he sees such evidence as the detectives choose to show him, and though he may advise on the best

way to question a detainee, he only meets the criminals if they agree to talk to him after sentencing.

Above all, he reaches his conclusions by painstaking examination of the facts. 'That's donkey work, it really is. *Anything*, absolutely anything, can be important. You can have two cases which are identical except in one detail, and you've got something completely different in case A from case B.' In one series of arson attacks which he worked on, the houses in question had been targeted because of the shape of their roofs.

Boon insists that he is not a detective, and is the first to acknowledge that trained policemen can pick up on things that he never would. The reverse, though, is also true. Examining the body of an old lady who had been stabbed, Boon was able to tell from the patterns of the wounds that the murderer was a picarist – that is, obsessed with cutting and jabbing with knives. The police mentioned that a suspect, who appeared to have an alibi, had suffered a cut; on Boon's advice, they asked the man to remove his shirt, and found that his body was a mass of self-inflicted wounds – 'Sure enough: because cutting the flesh is as exciting to picarists as Michelle Pfeiffer is to us, and if you can't do it to someone else, you do it to yourself.' DNA testing provided incontrovertible evidence that the man was guilty, and he was jailed for murder.

Does Boon get a buzz from his work? Only, he says, when blackmail or extortion is involved – 'Simply because the call can come at any time, you're playing a very fast game of chess, and the stakes can be damned high.' A particularly unpleasant case was that of the blackmailer who wrote to several young women based at Gatwick Airport, threatening to throw acid in their faces unless they supplied him with obscene photographs of themselves; one was even asked for her airline uniform.

Boon deduced from the letters that the criminal was an older man given to a 'very, very pure form of sadism', who worked at the airport, and had a strong interest in machinery. (The letters had mentioned a type of air hostess's hat worn in the Fifties, and contained computer-manipulated images.) He advised the police that although previous attempts to catch the blackmailer at drop-offs had failed because he never showed up on the appointed day, he would eventually find it 'absolutely irresistible' to visit the scene, and it was therefore worth carrying out extended surveillance. After three days of staking out a country lane, they finally saw a man drive up in a car and collect the uniform which had been left there. Keith Downer, a 40-year-old British Airways engineer working at Gatwick, was arrested, and subsequently sentenced to eight years in prison.

Despite such successes, many policemen are unconvinced of the merits of forensic psychology. Critics argue that a vague or inaccurate profile can simply muddy the waters for the police; problems also arise when the cracker forgets his place, or the police rely on him too heavily – as in the Rachel Nickell case, which collapsed because the profiler concerned had overstepped the mark and helped the police to entrap Colin Stagg. Boon's work includes giving regular talks to senior officers about what psychiatrists can and cannot do: different profilers have different strengths, and 'it is essential to know what your specialism is. It may be that along the way you garner experience of DNA and ultra-violet testing, but that's not what you're there for.'

He tells with satisfaction of how a party of extremely sceptical detectives arrived at his house at five o'clock on a Friday night, driven to their wits' end by a murder suspect who refused to crack under questioning. They ended up staying till three in the morning, while Boon diagnosed the case as one of necrophilia (an attraction, not necessarily

sexual, to dead bodies) – something which the policemen had never come across before. Boon told them that the murderer had had a lifetime of not being understood, and that if they showed him that they knew what his motivation was, he would talk to them about his crime. The man duly confessed.

'Julian is a very easy person to do business with,' says Superintendent Steve Scott of the Sussex Police, who first worked with Boon on the murder of 87-year-old Jean Barnes in Worthing. 'He was very good with our team – he realised that not all detectives are overly sold on profilers.' When a *Crimewatch* appeal produced 250 possible leads, Boon's profile helped Scott to prioritise the one that led to the killer, David Munley: without it, Scott believes, the investigation could have taken another four months, during which time Munley might well have killed again.

Julian Boon has taught at Leicester University for ten years, helping to establish the most highly regarded forensic Masters course in the country, and also lecturing – to the delight of those who recognise the Mills & Boon connection – on the psychology of love and attraction. Fifty years ago, he says, he might have followed his father into the family firm ('It's not generally known that Mills & Boon once had one of the biggest general and educational lists in the country'); but the relentless commercialism of modern publishing had no appeal for him, while discovering the world of psychology was – well, love at first sight. 'The idea that you could get *paid* for studying people astonished me.'

From the City of London School and Aberdeen University, Boon went to work for the Scottish Office, examining ways to make giving evidence in court a less frightening experience for children. (Video links were introduced partly as a result of his research.) It was then that he toyed with the idea of becoming a barrister – but the idea of legal technicalities

defeating natural justice was something which he found impossible to stomach. Instead, he applied to Leicester, where he told his interviewers that his interests were claret, blondes and Aston Martins. (In his younger days – 'though it may be difficult for you to believe as you look at me now' – he raced single-seater cars, and at the moment he covets an Aston Martin Vantage, 'in British racing green with red upholstery. I *love* talking dirty about Aston Martins.')

His greatest passion, however, is 'personality theoretics' – in other words, 'Why some people take the positive course in life, and some the negative: why one of us turns out to be old Ma Teresa of Calcutta, and another of us turns out to be old Ma Hindley of the Moors.' This, it transpires, is the real subject of his course on love and attraction, which encompasses the sinister phenomenon of 'alternative loving'.

'Normal loving involves risk – of rejection, or loss,' he explains. 'If you're afraid to take risks, you turn inwards: to sado-masochism, for example, which has at its root a hatred of anything unpredictable.' The sadistic Gatwick blackmailer found machinery easier to cope with than people, because with machines 'you are not going to get rejected. If they break down they can be fixed or replaced – easy. But people can let you down.'

In extreme cases, this state of mind can produce a tyrant such as Hitler or Saddam Hussein, or a serial killer: 'They are wired into a narcissistic world in which they cannot feel *anything* in terms of a relationship with other people. Yeah yeah yeah, they can *pretend* – they're past masters at that: but you look at Hitler laughing and it's quite clear there's nothing going on behind the eyes at all. He just knows that it's appropriate at that time to laugh to serve his purpose.'

Boon does not share the liberal view that sadistic or psychopathic personalities can be 'cured': the best we can hope to do is prevent them

from acting on their impulses. Myra Hindley's protestations that she has paid her debt to society do not wash with him because, he argues, if she really did feel remorse, she would believe that her crimes were too hideous to atone for.

'More interesting than that, Ian Brady came out and said, "She ain't changed." Was he doing it to protect society? I don't think so; because remember, control is everything to these people, and she is his one bone left in the kennel. If she gets out, he's got nothing left – so he queers the pitch for her, and possibly for the first time in his life has told the truth about something.'

There are times when Boon's appreciation of the criminal psyche is positively unsettling. (At one point in *The Real Cracker*, he observes of a serial rapist who preys on old women that he has 'tasted the nectars at a very deep level'.) I had been told, moreover, that he knew how to commit the perfect murder. Was this true? Might he, in other circumstances, have become Moriarty rather than Sherlock Holmes?

He thinks not. 'I *could* commit the perfect murder,' he agrees, 'but fortunately I don't have the psychopathic personality that would make me *want* to – or if I did, I would have to give myself up. There are people who would have the intelligence to do it, but it would have to be done in a cold, clinical way – which wouldn't appeal to the sadist.'

What, though, of the cold, clinical killings of Harold Shipman?

Boon is reluctant to discuss the Shipman case, since he is involved in the General Medical Council's inquiry into it; but he admits to having helped the police at the early stages, and – choosing his words with painful care – gives this interpretation of it:

'In my view, Shipman is a very cold, arrogant man whose role as a GP made him – in his eyes – lord of the area, and led him to overreach

himself to the point where he thought he could get away with a clumsy attempt to forge a will.

"I have read many people with no input into the case saying that he was "playing God". I think it more likely that he was excited and drawn to *the point of death*, and has become fixated on it. Necrophiles want bodies and stench; sadists want the expression of helplessness. As a possible explanation, Shipman could be on the cusp of the two.'

Boon thinks it unlikely that Shipman will ever make a confession: 'He's so caught up in his own self-importance that he cannot conceive of admitting that he's done anything wrong, even though there is incontrovertible evidence that he has.' He adds that Shipman may well try to take his own life: 'He's in for his natural, he can't do what he likes to do, he's lost his status as a GP; the only thing he's got is notoriety – and therefore suicide is a possibility. But I'm sure the authorities are aware of that.'

Chillingly, he says that there is also 'every possibility' that the current estimate of Shipman's victims – up to 300, according to the clinical audit published in January – is too low. 'He didn't suddenly wake up one morning and decide to start killing people: the impulse had been with him for some time. Whether he chose to act on it is a different matter – but I would be very surprised if the killings were confined to those we know about in Hyde.'

The role and usefulness of forensic psychologists continues to be hotly debated. Boon, acutely aware of this, likens the complementary roles of the psychologist and the detective to a hunt for an illegal radio station: 'You get a two-point fix, and if you're coming to similar conclusions for different reasons, you may be on the right track.

‘I’m always careful to say to the investigating officer, “This is my opinion. If anything resonates, go with it; if it’s not as good as what you’re doing at the moment, put it to one side.” Never let the psychological tail wag the investigative dog. I’m a forensic psychologist – I ain’t God.’