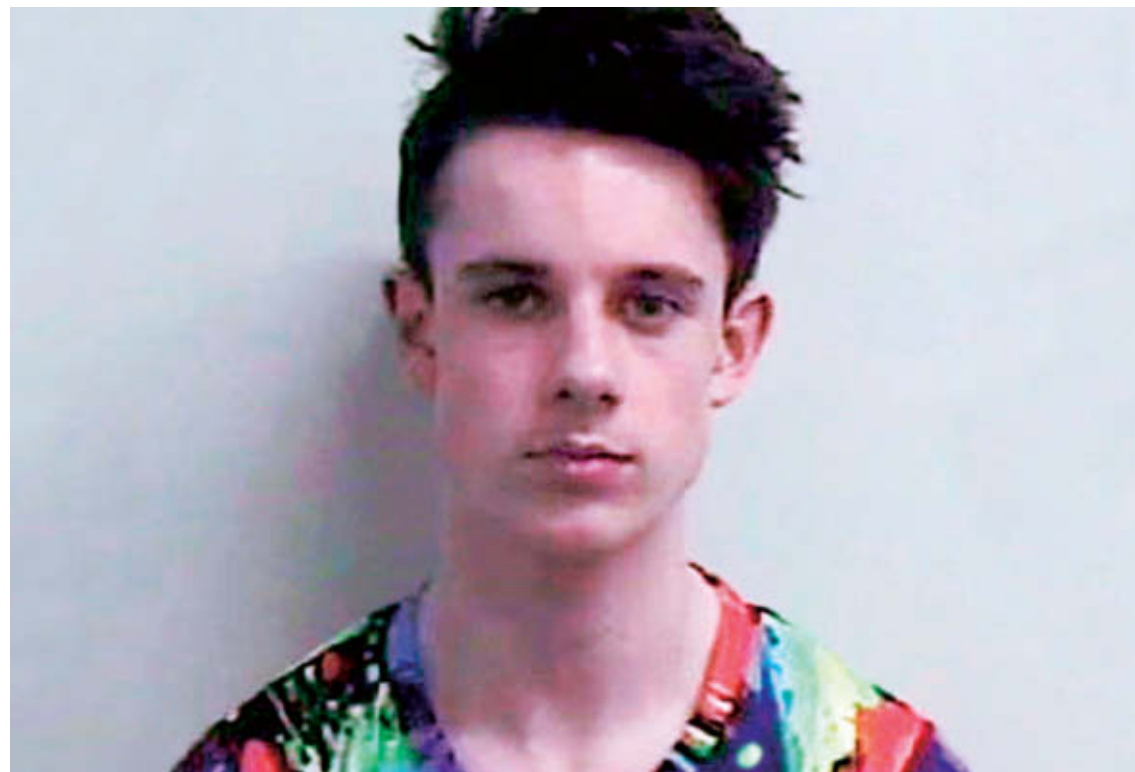




...come face to face with a psychopath

Last month, Aaron Campbell was convicted of the rape and murder of six-year-old Alesha MacPhail. In court, *Katie Glass* witnessed a mild-mannered teenager devoid of empathy or remorse

The evidence was harrowing. Details emerged in court that were so horrendous, I wished I had never heard them. I worried I was failing at my job because when it came to writing the news story, I couldn't bring myself to repeat them. At times, people in the public gallery watching the trial held their heads in their hands and wept. Only one person seemed unaffected by the horror, and that was the boy in the dock.

It was last July when I first started covering the murder of six-year-old Alesha MacPhail. Her brutalised body had been discovered in woodland on the Scottish island of Bute, a day after

she had gone missing from her bed. It seemed impossible that something so savage had taken place somewhere so gentle; on a tiny island where locals leave their doors unlocked and seals flop on mossy rocks by silver waves.

The island was on edge when I arrived. Police were warning locals to "be vigilant and look after each other", as rumours spread. There was some nasty, unfounded speculation that Syrian refugees who had been relocated to the island might somehow be responsible for the little girl's death, while others whispered that police had been checking ferry passengers and wondered about strange men from out of town.

It was shocking when we heard that a local 16-year-old boy had been arrested. I went to Greenock Sheriff Court to hear the charges read. When we heard these charges were rape and murder, I felt sick.

I returned seven months later to cover Aaron Campbell's trial at the High Court in Glasgow. I don't know what kind of person I expected to see, but it wasn't the child standing in the dock. A teenage boy dressed in a smart, fashionable, grey check suit — an outfit I would later learn he had worn to his school prom. He had smooth, milky skin and neat black hair, which he occasionally swept back from his face.



One journalist was mocked on social media for describing how attractive he was — "handsome, in a modern, metrosexual way". But in truth I was also struck by how he looked. It seemed unimaginable that this plausible, well-presented young man, whose mother described him as clever and well liked, could have committed such a heinous crime. I wanted to believe it was impossible. The other option was too terrible to contemplate.

During the trial, the public gallery of Court No 6 was full but as silent as a grave. Alesha's mother, Georgia Lochrane, herself only 24, attended every day, a tiny figure swaddled in an oversized cardigan. Alesha's father, Robert MacPhail, wore a tracksuit. Photographs would appear of them outside the court building, smoking cigarettes. It was a reminder not to judge by appearances.

It was unbearable to see how Georgia wept. When the most graphic details were read in court, she left. People in the public gallery covered their faces. You could not be unaffected by the images we saw: of Alesha's little pink shorts and the white vest she wore that last night, when her family put her to bed with a Peppa Pig DVD. "She was so young," a woman behind me breathed. It was

Above, clockwise from top left: the house Alesha was abducted from; her father, Robert MacPhail (left), and mother, Georgina Lochrane (centre), at the funeral last July; her coffin; and police forensic teams scour the Isle of Bute. Opposite: Aaron Campbell. Below: a school photo of Alesha

unbearable to see 3D images of her body dumped in the woods and hear the pathologist describe her "catastrophic" injuries.

When a forensic scientist gave crucial DNA evidence, he clasped his hands to stop himself shaking. At times, the judge asked the jury if they were OK to go on. I often thought I might leave.

The boy, by contrast, was the calmest person in the room. Impassive, his eyes casually flicked back and forth between the barristers and witnesses on the stand. His face never betrayed interest, horror or shock. Later, a social-work report would reveal he had said "it took everything to stop him laughing" during the trial. To prevent himself, he had to "zip his mouth shut".

I would have been reluctant to use the word psychopath, especially about a child, but the same report later showed that Campbell presented "a range of traits on the psychopathy checklist". It also found he had "a wide range of factors present in relation to potential sexually harmful behaviour".

Campbell did not have to take the stand, but he chose to do so. His confidence was startling. He stood square, calm and composed. He described his ordinary teenage life on the island — girlfriends, camping

Campbell said he was "satisfied" with the murder and "mildly amused" at how long it took police to catch him

trips, parties with friends. He spoke so fluidly and with such casual colloquialisms that he had to be asked to slow down and explain what he meant. He seemed unaffected by the seriousness of the court or the horror of what had taken place. At one point, he shrugged he would never commit murder because "it'd ruin your life".

He lied with ease. He denied murdering Alesha, mounting a detailed defence of incrimination, claiming Alesha's father's girlfriend had killed Alesha, planting his DNA at the scene with a used condom.

He was cocky, even under cross-examination. Self-assured, he detailed his movements the night Alesha was killed, even specifying the route he claimed he walked on a map. He only showed emotion if challenged, when he would snap. In those moments, he seemed to give himself away.

Only much later, after putting Alesha's parents through the distress of the trial and once he had been convicted, did Campbell confess. He said he'd taken Alesha in "a moment of opportunity". He said he was "satisfied" with the murder and "mildly amused" at how long it took the police to catch him.

Later, newspapers would call Campbell a "monster". I too would write about his interest in dark internet games and in person I found his coldness shocking, but what remained most chilling was how like a normal teenager he appeared.

We seem obsessed with monsters. Netflix shows such as *The Ted Bundy Tapes* and *Dirty John* reveal our fascination with trying to comprehend how evil can be found among the everyday. But if I learnt anything covering the Alesha MacPhail trial, it was that there is no such thing as "monsters". Psychopaths are people. Perhaps that is the hardest truth ■

DANGER LIST

8%

of males in prison are psychopaths, compared with an estimated 1% of the general population

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