

Flay your mind: Stranger Things S3 just might be the show's best season yet

Enlarge / Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and the gang are back to face down yet another supernatural threat to Hawkins, Indiana, in the third season of *Stranger Things*.

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Warning: *This story contains spoilers for episodes 5-8 of Stranger Things' third season, following up on Nathan Matisse's slightly spoiler-y review of episodes 1-4. You can read our non-spoiler preview of the new season here, or catch up on what's come before with past Ars stories on season one and season two.*

Everyone's favorite teen sleuthing squad is back, taking on Russian operatives, local corruption, and the latest supernatural evil to emerge from the Upside Down in the third season of Netflix's *Stranger Things*. Anyone who feared the series might be losing its luster, three years on, should rest easy: season three is just as good as the first—in some respects, even better.

The first season was set in November 1983, when an accident at a secret government lab opened an inter-dimensional portal and unleashed a supernatural threat from a different dimension onto the unsuspecting town of Hawkins, Indiana, in the form of a creature dubbed the Demogorgon. The source of that accident?

A young girl with psychokinetic powers, known only as Eleven (Milly Bobby Brown). She escaped the lab and was befriended by a group of preteens whose friend Will (Noah Schnapp) mysteriously disappeared into an alternate dimension dubbed the Upside Down. They teamed up to find Will and defeat the monster that took him.

In season 2, we learned that monster was just the tip of the iceberg, and an even more powerful entity, dubbed The Mind Flayer, threatened the town, possessing poor Will, who was still traumatized by his stay in the Upside Down. Eleven managed to close the portal, but the final scene showed the Mind Flayer still lurking ominously in that dark mirror image of Hawkins.

In season three, Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Will, Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), Max (Sadie Sink), and Eleven are growing up and pairing off, with all the usual melodrama that goes along with such scenarios. Mike's sister Nancy (Natalia Dyer) is still dating Will's older brother Jonathon (Charlie Heaton). Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour) isn't dealing well with Mike and Eleven's teen romance, while Will's mother, Joyce (Wynona Ryder), is struggling to cope with the great personal loss she suffered last season.

Our plucky teen heroes learned a lot about the Mind Flayer over the course of two seasons. But the monster has also been learning about them, and it's back to take revenge—and it knows Eleven is the only real threat standing in its way. In the trailer, we learned that the Mind Flayer was never trapped in the Upside Down when Eleven closed the portal at the end of season two. It has been lurking in Hawkins this entire time, which means it has found a new host: Max's older stepbrother, Billy (Dacre Montgomery). And Billy is recruiting more townspeople as hosts, all with the aim of building a creature that can take out Eleven once and for all, leaving it free to flay the minds of pretty much everyone else alive.

Summer sleuthin'

- "You can't have America without Erica."
- Maya Hawke joins the cast as Steve's Scoops Ahoy co-worker, Robin.
- The "Scoop Troop" (including Erica) almost steals the entire season.
- Teen sleuths on the trail of clues.
- Eleven and Max's budding friendship blossoms at the Starcourt Mall.
- Local newspaper reporter Bruce Lowe (Jake Busey) is an embarrassment to journalism even before the Mind Flayer arrives.
- Bickering odd couple Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper (aka "Fat Rambo") are tracking down a Russian plot.
- Eleven probes the Upside Down for more clues.
- Billy is about to meet the Mind Flayer.
- Hopper gets stood up on his first date with Joyce.
- Cary Elwes is appropriately smarmy as corrupt Mayor Larry Kline.

The best part of this new season is how tightly plotted it is; the pacing is well-nigh perfect, even if it takes several episodes before the purpose behind various developments becomes clear. Given the complicated narrative and sheer size of the cast—not to mention the need to give all the leads key roles in the approaching showdown—that's no small feat. There are a lot of moving pieces.

While Eleven, Mike, and the rest of the gang are just as delightful as ever, the colorful supporting cast frequently threatens to steal the show, most notably the "Scoop Troop." Dustin joins forces with reformed high school jock Steve Harrington (Joe Keery), Steve's co-worker at Scoops Ahoy ice cream parlor, Robin (Maya Hawke, spawn of Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke), and Lucas' precocious little sister Erica (Priah Ferguson). They discover the Russians are building a secret

lab under the new Starcourt Mall, with the help of the corrupt Hawkins mayor, Larry Kline (Cary Elwes).

The other supporting standouts include investigative journalist/conspiracy theorist Murray Bauman (Brett Gelman), who still has that keen relationship insight he showed in season two, this time directed toward the unspoken tension between Joyce and Hopper. They need him to translate for Alexei (Alec Utgoff), a Russian engineer only too willing to dish on the machine they've been building under the mall to reopen the portal to the Upside Down—so long as he can watch Looney Toons and get a steady supply of cherry-flavored Slurpees.

As my colleague Nathan Matisse pointed out in his review of the first half of the season, Nancy and Jonathan are stuck in the weakest storyline, interning at the local paper. But even that leads somewhere in the end, as the pair (eventually) discovers that people are being possessed by the Mind Flayer. As in prior seasons, eventually all those threads converge and lead to a showdown with the Mind Flayer—this time at the Starcourt Mall.

(MAJOR spoilers below. Stop now if you haven't finished watching the season.)

Eleven has always been the Hawkins secret weapon when it comes to beating back the Mind Flayer, although the rest of the cast certainly contributed. In season three, the Duffer brothers up the ante by effectively taking Eleven out of the equation. She gets bitten by the Flay-Monster (a huge, shape-shifting thing with Graboid-like tentacles), and despite removing the parasite planted in her leg, that brief infection neutralizes her telekinetic powers.

It's a savvy move, since otherwise the finale would have seemed too much like a retread from seasons past. In the end, it takes a village to defeat the Mind Flayer and save the

world. Every main cast member brings some unique attribute to the table: Nancy's marksmanship, for instance; Jonathan's mechanical know-how; Dustin's supersized ham radio (dubbed "Cerebro"); and Lucas' love of powerful fireworks. Unable to rely on her powers, Eleven can still use her prior access to his memories, and her natural empathy, to reach whatever is left of Billy's mind, prompting him to redeem himself by making one last courageous stand against the beast that has hijacked his brain. The bully gets a hero's death.

The biggest twist in the season finale is Hopper sacrificing himself so that Joyce can blow up the Russian machine, closing the portal and cutting off the Flay-Monster from its energy source, the Upside Down. It's likely to break fans' hearts even more than the heroic death of lovable dweeb Bob Newby (Sean Astin) in season two. Like Billy, Hopper has his issues, stemming from the loss of his daughter and subsequent breakup of his marriage. He's been slowly crawling his way out of a dark emotional hole, thanks to Eleven and some nascent sparks with Joyce. The wordless look of anguish that passes between Joyce and Eleven when the latter realizes she's lost her father is far more devastating than any dialogue could have conveyed.

It's not over yet

Netflix hasn't officially renewed the series for a fourth season, but given the record-breaking viewer numbers, it's just a matter of time. A mid-credits scene hints that season four will likely delve further into the as-yet-unanswered Russian question—namely, why were the Russians trying to open the gate to the Upside Down after Eleven and the gang went to such great lengths to close it in season two? The scene takes us to a secret base in Russia, where two guards approach a prison door. "Not the American," one guard says. Instead, they drag off a Russian prisoner and lock him in a room with a captive Demogorgon, which proceeds to devour the screaming

prisoner.

There has been much online speculation that “the American” refers to Hopper, since we never actually saw him die, plus loyal fans aren’t quite ready to give up hope that David Harbour and his “dad bod” will be back at some point. Or perhaps it refers to Dr. Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine), the scientist who found and exploited Eleven in the first place. He supposedly died at the hands of the first Demogorgon in season one, but there’s a brief mention in season two that Brenner is still alive.

The Duffer brothers recently hinted to *Entertainment Weekly* that season four will open up the storytelling to include plot lines outside of Hawkins—and that yes, the Russians and their captive Demogorgon will be playing a major role. We’ve already seen some of that in season two’s “The Lost Sister” episode, where Eleven went to Chicago to find Kali (Linnea Berthelsen), another young woman with special powers—also the victim of Brenner’s secret laboratory. It’s no coincidence that the Byers family moved out of Hawkins, taking Eleven with them. We’ll probably see Eleven grappling with the loss of her powers (hopefully just temporary) in the fourth season, and maybe Kali will come back into the picture, given how influential she was in helping Eleven realize the full potential of her telekinetic ability.

The Duffer brothers have also said that they are likely to end *Stranger Things* after a fourth (or possibly a fifth) season. Frankly, I’m not sure how much further they can raise the dramatic stakes before it all becomes a bit too familiar and repetitive. But given how well they developed everything for this fantastic third season, I’m willing to take season four on faith—for now.

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