Stranger Things 3, eps. 1-4: Hawkins, Indiana, will never be the same

Enlarge / Perhaps teen romance can split ‘em up temporarily, but you can’t keep the gang apart for long if evil lurks around Hawkins.

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***Warning**: This story contains some spoilers for episodes 1-4 of* Stranger Things*‘ third season. 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.*
Russians. It always had to be Russians.

Maybe it should be called Gorbachev’s Law, but put any kind of get-the-gang-together action story into the 1980s, and eventually modern democracy’s favorite villain must rear its head. And in *Stranger Things 3,* the show wastes no time—this go-around may be once again centered in Hawkins, but S3’s very first scene shows there’s no going back after the events of the show’s first two seasons. The scope and scale of evil facing our favorite now-teenage heroes grows simultaneously as they do.

Of course, precisely *how* the larger number of baddies—the Russians, the shady Starcourt Mall employees, the supernatural Upside Down forces that seemingly watched *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956 version obviously, this being 1985) since last

season—intersect, what they're working toward, and why they choose to prey upon the already unfortunately victimized town of Hawkins remains a mystery for *Stranger Things 3*'s second half. But if the first four episodes of Netflix's current flagship have shown us anything, it's that the Duffer Bros. recognized their show's familiar, nostalgic formula needed to change. And luckily for those of us raptly watching, they appear to have a story in mind that can accommodate such evolution.

- Perhaps *Stranger Things 3*'s real MVPs: The Duffer Bros. (Matt Duffer left, Ross right) and Priah Ferguson, who plays Lucas' little sister, Erica.
  Tina Rowden/Netflix
- Will the Wise is no longer constantly possessed, but he's still very much figuring out his place in his new teen world.
- Joyce and Hopper remain a satisfying detective duo in S3.
- We have a Scott Clarke sighting!
- Any Steve and Dustin adventures remain gold in S3, and once again their comedic side quests appear to not be so tangential.
- Girl power is pretty dang effective and enjoyable in *Stranger Things 3*'s first half.
- Billy, once a normal jerk, now perhaps a much more dangerous wolf in jerk's clothing.
- Mrs. Wheeler, hear us out, this is *not* a good idea on many levels (even if it's an amusing bit for the elder fans).
- Uh, thanks Heather. We'll pass for now.
- The more we learn about Cary Elwes' Mayor Kline, the less we like the guy.
- And the award for best addition to the S3 cast so far goes to…

Growing up is hard to do (the show makes it look easy)

The most striking thing from the first half of *Stranger Things S3* is how grown up the show has become. Yes, physically our kid heroes have become teen heroes. But rather than struggling with that (and, say, rushing to produce as much as possible before actors age and look implausibly out of middle/high school), the story has grown in logical ways to accommodate how life as an early teen is different from life as an almost teen—and it neatly ties this coming-of-age material to the series' usual dark-and-eerie fun.

Initially, the thing that most occupies and complicates life for Mike, Eleven, and the gang isn't another demon prince, it's the demands of puberty. The group has coupled off to an extent—Mike with Eleven, Lucas with Max, Will with dying dreams of another round of D&D—and struggles to define a new normal. Never mind larger group dynamics, what does healthy dating look like for never-been-kissed Mike Wheeler and never-been-out-of-the-lab Eleven? New (again) dad Jim Hopper certainly doesn't think he's seeing it, as most nights at the household involve Mike and El kissing the night away, and the fallout from this has ripple effects for the series early on. So far, the only time we see all the kids together may be when they welcome Dustin home from his summer camp.

Luckily, everyone has plenty to do while paired off. The boys (Mike, Lucas, and Will) initially have the most grounded-in-reality task: they're heartbroken, don't understand relationships, and simply must get over fleeting sorrow. Doing this only further opens a divide, though—in perhaps his best performance to date, Noah Schnapp (Will) gets a standout sequence in episode three as he gives Mike a piece of his mind after the constant hyper-focus on the girls pushes Will to snap. Mike thoughtlessly tries to defend himself ("I'm not trying to be a jerk, but," he begins. "We're not kids

anymore—what did you think? We were never going to get girlfriends? We're going to sit in my basement and play games for the rest of our lives?"), sending Will stomping off for a little reflection time… which eventually proves crucial to the group's ability to sniff out the fact something's up in town.

The girls, on the other hand, take action. Eleven has always had the ability to mentally teleport elsewhere when her senses are deprived, so she and Max are spying on the boys before moving onto some telepathic spin the bottle. It eventually lands on Max's older brother, Billy (effectively last season's one-note jerk), revealing that perhaps the Upside Down hasn't been so neatly sealed off from the real world. The two groups come to the same conclusion in dramatically different ways before reuniting to do something about it, engaging in a slick action sequence where they must lure a possibly demonic Billy into a public pool sauna in order to burn some Mind Flayer out of him (nicely leveraging knowledge they discovered last season).

[embedded content]
The latest trailer for *Stranger Things S3.*
A sequence like this perhaps couldn't have existed in earlier seasons. There's a repeated sense of genuine danger—Billy nearly stabbing his sister; El getting choked out by a human—that would have felt "too much" previously. The show has always been TV-14 (the very first episode involves a monster hunting down a young kid and lab workers getting murdered by something supernatural), but its cast and content have aged up to that line now. Barb (and Bob!) died for this.

Luckily, things aren't all dark CW drama around Hawkins. As much fun as it is to watch our heroes unravel whatever mystery and address whatever danger awaits them, the show's undeniable potency comes from the fact that audiences love these characters and want to watch them being themselves. Looking back on S3's first half, the most delightful moments likely come from Hopper continuing to be rough around the edges

(fighting off a hangover but piecing together clues of a larger problem alongside the always capable Joyce Byers) or time spent at the mall with the Scoops Ahoy crew—Steve, new co-worker Robin, and repeat customers Dustin and Erica.

These sequences work tremendously well because not only do we get more of what we love from characters, but their continued capability runs counter to what you expect from all the comic relief. Maybe Hawkins will once again need Eleven to be at the center of any hope to fight off evil, but Hopper and Joyce or our International ice cream sleuths will inevitably have a part to play in connecting the larger puzzle.

Whether or not things wrap up as tidily as they did in seasons past, the first half of *Stranger Things S3* renews our confidence in this world (and its potential expanded universe) going forward. There are clearly more ideas to explore stemming from Hawkins: new life challenges, greater evils, more impacts being made on life elsewhere (and we're not even talking about potential Mormon camp girlfriends sequestered in Utah). Just as inevitably as the season's early evils will interconnect, so too will our heroes reconnect as a larger group and figure out how to battle back. And ultimately, if the Russians are once again playing with Herculean forces humanity doesn't yet know how to control or contain, well, HBO reminded us how that turns out in May.

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