

Stranger Things, Season One: Government spying and the supernatural in the 1980s

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Stranger Things is a new American science fiction and horror web television series released on Netflix in July 2016. Its first season is set in late 1983 and tells the story of a 12-year-old boy who goes missing in a small town where a top-secret government agency is running experiments on supernatural phenomena. Set during the end of the Cold War, the tests are performed to give US intelligence innovative ways to spy on the Soviet Union. The series is notable for being an homage to 1980s pop culture, particularly science fiction-related elements of that era.

The first season consists of eight 45-minute episodes, where the mystery of the boy's disappearance as well as supernatural phenomena unfold simultaneously for the characters and the viewer.

One night, after Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) and his three best friends part company, Will bicycles home by himself in the dark. In the woods near his house, he encounters a shadowy creature that chases him to his house and causes electrical equipment to flicker and short out. Will and the creature seemingly vanish into thin air.

The same evening, a young girl with a shaved head (Millie Bobby Brown) and wearing a hospital gown appears at a local diner where the owner gives her food and struggles—due to the girl's seeming inability to speak—to learn where she comes from. Armed government agents arrive at the diner, but fail to capture the girl, who escapes into the woods.

The following evening, the town forms a large search party for Will, but his three best friends—Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) and Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin)—have already snuck out to search on their own and run into the girl in the woods. They bring her to Mike's house and learn her name is "Eleven." They soon discover she has psychokinetic abilities, including

the power to communicate with the missing Will. She tells the boys that "bad people" are looking for her and wishes to remain hidden in Mike's basement.

While the boys, with Eleven's help, try to figure out what happened to their friend, Will's mother Joyce (Winona Ryder) begins noticing the lights and electrical gadgets in her house are communicating with her. She concludes that Will is using them as a conduit from wherever he is located. Joyce installs strings of Christmas lights all over her house and tears up sections of the wall in her efforts to make contact with him, in scenes suggestive of Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

Over the course of the season, the viewer learns that Eleven was kidnapped at birth by a scientist working for the unnamed government agency who is using her abilities to spy on Soviet officials. By putting her in a sensory deprivation tank under water, she can pick up radio waves from very long distances. The experiments went wrong, however, when she met the creature that later kidnapped Will during one of the deprivation sessions, and somehow tore an interdimensional hole that allowed the creature to move back and forth between dimensions. The season ends with a showdown between Eleven and her friends on one side and the government agents who wish to recover her on the other, while Joyce and local police chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour) slip through one of the interdimensional gates to find Will.

Much of the first season is an homage to the 1980s—or, rather, the way that suburban kids might remember the 1980s. The kids obsess about comic books and *Star Wars*, they are members of their school's AV club and use a HAM radio and walkie talkies, and they struggle with a rubber and plastic kids' pool trying to create a substitute deprivation tank

for Eleven. Some sequences are reminiscent of those one might find in *The Goonies* (1985).

The style and cinematography of the series also closely suggests popular science fiction and horror projects of the time, including *Alien* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Twin Peaks* (1990-91). The series also utilizes recognizable music from the 1980s and conveniently features a character who enjoys more “underground” artists such as Joy Division and The Clash.

One of the particularly effective and well-developed elements of the series is its depiction of the CIA-like government agency, which murders the town’s citizens, taps people’s phones, produces fake autopsies in order to fake deaths and tortures both experimental subjects and outsiders to get information. The series also captures the spirit of that time, following Vietnam and Watergate, with most the characters mistrustful of the government agents. Only one character says “we should trust our government”—Mike’s father, who is depicted as a dull and clueless business executive.

Another compelling aspect of *Stranger Things* is its treatment of Joyce Byers, a working-class mother who encounters real struggles while taking care of her children. In the opening episode, when Will goes missing, Joyce does not even know her son is lost at first because of her work schedule. She relies on her older son, Jonathan (Charlie Heaton), to watch Will, but he also has to work his part-time job on the evening in question. Joyce is initially seen as mad for believing the supernatural interactions with her son are real, but by the end she becomes a surrogate mother to Eleven and the others recognize that she was correct.

Some of the romantic elements in the series are a little contrived, while others are endearing. One of the side stories involves Mike’s older sister Nancy (Natalia Dyer), a disciplined student who gets involved with a boy who is more popular and sleeps with multiple partners. This is probably the weakest part of the story and adds very little to the drama. On the other hand, Eleven and Mike develop romantic feelings for one another, and this helps the girl gather strength to use her abilities against the government agents. Their interactions are heartwarming and a little tragic.

Ultimately, *Stranger Things* offers an interesting drama and decent character development, along with quality cinematography and special effects. Many of

the actors, particularly the children, give excellent performances. Based on her work here, Millie Bobby Brown, a young English actress (born 2004), will likely be heard from again.

The homage to 1980s pop culture is a bit overdone and too obvious at times. One gets the idea at a certain point. Overall, the series is not monumental, but it is enjoyable.

Season One has won several honors, including awards from the American Film Institute, the Producers Guild of America, and the Screen Actors Guild. A second season of *Stranger Things* is scheduled for an October release.



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