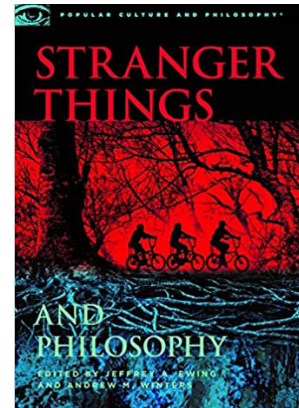


Stranger Things and Philosophy, edited by Jeffrey A. Ewing and Andrew M. Winter



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Jeffrey A. Ewing and Andrew M. Winter, editors. *Stranger Things and Philosophy: Thus Spake the Demogorgon*. Open Court, 2019. Popular Culture and Philosophy. Paperback. 256 pg. \$19.95. ISBN 9780812694703.



Stranger Things is a retro-style Netflix series that indulges viewers in gratuitous 80's tropes reminiscent of Steven Spielberg's films of epic childhood adventures, pastel and neon clothing, gravity-defying Aquanet hair, and devil-worshipping role-playing games. Drawing from such popular culture groups as the misfits from the Goon Docks in *The Goonies* (1985) and the Losers' Club from Stephen King's *It* (1986), the Duffer Brothers offer their take on the child collective through a modern lens. While this series offers a visually appealing aesthetic shell of science fiction immersed in popular culture from the 1980s, its core is rich with philosophical concerns that target real-world issues, such as Cold War fear, the AIDS epidemic, and personal identity. Striking a balance between cultural entertainment and substantial matters of existence, *Stranger Things* is replete with themes for both enjoyment and critical exploration.

This edited collection, with a parodic title referencing Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, offers varied philosophical approaches to the Duffer Brothers' critically acclaimed series *Stranger Things*. Similar to Nietzsche's themes of the *übermensch*, will-to-power, and the values of good and evil, this volume explores these subjects through the telekinetic abilities of Eleven, the strength of the child collective, and the invasive energies of new species. Broken into five sections, this philosophical investigation of *Stranger Things* offers an easy read both to those familiar with the series and those new to it. Whether purposefully or accidentally, this collection alternates its sections between the fictional and real-world issues represented in the series to present a juxtaposed jigsaw that conjoins thematic elements and offers varied approaches. Sections one, three and five, "Strange Thoughts," "Nothing is Stranger Than Reality," and "How Do We Cope with the Strange?" address the fictional world, while sections two and four, "The Joy of the Creepy" and "How Strange Are We?" explore the comparable real-world concerns.

The sections focusing on the show's fictional universe delve into the primary themes prevalent throughout the series: 80's tropes, Barb, and the Demogorgon. With focus on these subjects, each essay examines familiar theories of hyperreality, childhood and illusions of happiness,

friendship, and anachronistic perspectives of 1980's aesthetics. Specifically, the essay "Abnormal is the New Normal," written by Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, Diego Foranda, and Mariana Zarate, explores and offers clarification to some questionable moments within the series. For those of us familiar with the behavior of so-called parental "normalcy" in the 1980s, such things as discussions of sexual preference or overt expression of sexuality were not typically held between parents and children (i. e. Joyce's acknowledgement and acceptance of Will's orientation or Karen's meaningful "talk" with Nancy over her intimate relationships with Steve and/or Jonathan). This essay, however, suggests that *Stranger Things* and the behavioral techniques employed by the showrunners are constructed by the "use of a millennial voice packaged in 1980s aesthetics" (183). Exploring the show's anachronistic modern perspective beneath the façade of an 80's style, this chapter not only deconstructs common questions of "inauthenticity," but reinforces the other chapters sharing similar themes.

The sections focusing on real-world issues, "The Joy of the Creepy" and "How Strange Are We?," while cleaving to the themes of the 80s and consciousness, examine nature and the self through theories of the grotesque, phobias, fear, and reflections of horror in reality. Offering a seamless transition between the bracketing sections, these chapters provide insightful justifications of monstrosity (both symbolic and real). The chapter "Horror Appeals to Our Dual Nature," by Franklin S. Allaire and Krista S. Gehring, juxtaposes previous theories of the Mind Flayer, or the Shadow Monster, and Demogorgons as embodiments of evil from the Upside Down by suggesting that these figurations are symbolic representations of realistic 80s fears and phobias (e. g. the AIDS epidemic). By relating these fantastical depictions of monstrosity to a terrifying and enigmatic real-world concern, this chapter provides a perfect example of the balance between fiction and reality which mirrors the overall collection.

This edited collection is highly recommended for both fans of *Stranger Things* and those who wish to revisit their childhood in the 1980s. While there are some repetitive theories applied throughout the collection, these scholars each demonstrate a unique approach to the varied elements of *Stranger Things*. Much of this volume represents a clear understanding and knowledge of the decade in which the series is embedded, as well as the theories that necessitate each critical analysis. Although not free of minor grammatical or mechanical issues, and the occasional incorrect reference to character names, this collection perfectly situates itself in the canon of *Stranger Things* philosophy. By providing alternating sections exploring the fantastic versus the realistic that fluidly transition into one another, the collection disrupts any repetition of theories which could ultimately detract from the purpose of the text. Many of these chapters offer a deeper understanding of perspective through intertextual analyses of good/evil, identity, and nature/culture, which would be valuable in an academic environment.

Unfortunately, this volume was released prior to the release of the third season of *Stranger Things*; therefore, it covers only the first two seasons. However, for those interested in philosophy, horror, or a science fiction series that perpetuates the legacy of the 1980's phenomenon, this collection is essential for your journey.

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