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## Stranger Things 2 is Television Candy Perfect for Halloween

When I watched the first season of “Stranger Things” last year, it reminded me of how my Dad talks about when “Star Wars” came out. It was great because of the cinematography, the soundtrack and the characters, but part of what made it so special was that it came out of nowhere. Perhaps because Netflix releases its seasons of TV all at once, it did not accumulate the same hype as other TV shows and flew under the radar until one of my friends recommended it to me. I instantly started binging. The show quickly became a cultural phenomenon and the subject of intense debate among my friends (justice for Barb!).

When the trailer for the second season was released in July internet forums and sub-reddits ignited with speculation. When it was finally released on Halloween weekend, the show’s creators, the Duffer Brothers, had one of the most anticipated shows of the year. With success came a higher budget and higher expectation and like “The Empire Strikes Back”, “Stranger Things 2” delivers on all counts. Stranger Things 2 is like the first season on steroids. The villain is bigger and badder (it’s salient this time!), the effects are even more spectacular, and there’s even some Jedi Training (Eleven is back!).

At the same time, it doesn’t deviate too far from what made the first season so good. Many of the same romantic new wave synths and post-punk beats that made the the first season’s soundtrack so iconic are back and once again a key part to the show’s emotional impact. The 1980s throwbacks and popular culture references still abound, only this time ranging from

“GhostBusters” and “Friday the 13th” Halloween costumes to the hair product Farrah Faucet Spray. The plot is also, while more ambitious, also relatively similar.

Stranger Things 2 picks up about a year after the events of the first season, and things seem relatively back to normal in Hawkins, Indiana. After escaping from the Upside Down — the alternate shadow dimension which terrorizes the town in Season 1 — Will (Noah Schnapp) has been reunited with best friends Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), and Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), and instead of Dungeons and Dragons the “party”, as they call themselves, have moved on to the neighborhood arcade. As in season 1, a monster from the Upside Down presents itself and Will is again the primary target. Chief Hopper (David Harbour), Joyce (Will’s mom played by Winona Ryder) and teenagers Jonathan (Will’s brother played by Charlie Heaton), Nancy (Mike’s older sister played by Natalie Dyer), and Nancy’s boyfriend Steve (Joe Keery) come together to once again prevent the Upside Down from taking over the town of Hawkins.

Stranger Things 2 is not called Stranger Things season 2 for a reason— it’s thrilling, fun and ultimately familiar plot makes it feel more like a movie sequel than an iteration of a television series. In nine episodes —the show refers to them as chapters — ranging from 42 to 62 minutes in length, it’s like a good page turner. Each chapter begs the next to be watched, and because Netflix releases its season of television in their entirety, it’s totally possible to binge it all in one sitting (pee break permitting).

What really sets the show apart, though, are the characters and the acting. The Duffer Brothers are known to collaborate heavily with their actors and it shows. Each actor seems perfectly cast for the role and as the resident sports expert, I felt some season ending awards are in order.

The First award is comeback player of the year and it goes to Will for somewhat obvious reasons. He didn't get much screen time in season 1 due to his disappearance into the Upside Down, but also Noah Schnapp's emotional portrayal of a young boy dealing with seemingly unending trauma is truly impressive. Don't be surprised if you're eyes sweat a little when his friends and family try to get through to him throughout the season.

The next award is Most Improved player, which is also a tough decision. Eleven — the mage child who saves Hawkins in Season 1 — probably experienced the most growth as a character and her scenes with Chief Hopper are some of the most emotionally evocative in the season, but I'm going to give the award it to Steve (sorry Eleven!). Steve's shocking transition from high school bully to caring boyfriend and attentive baby sitter came out of nowhere and also his hair is as dope as ever.

Rookie of the Year was between Max, the redheaded tomboy who joins the Hawkins boys from California; her older brother Billy (Dacre Montgomery), the psychopathic heartthrob who takes over Steve's place as ultimate Alpha of Hawkins high; and Bob (Sean Astin), the lovable RadioShack employee and boyfriend of Joyce. It could have gone to anyone but I'm going with

Bob because he has great dad jokes and because he says “easy peasy” more times in this season than I have in my entire life. Oh, and he does some important things too.

My MVP goes to, Drumroll.... Chief Hopper (Eleven is going to be pissed!) because (1) he is a great dad to Eleven (2) he’s an overall badass and (3) the man’s got moves.

The only criticisms I have of Stranger Things 2 are largely the same from Stranger Things 1. Stranger things 2 is like a big bucket of Halloween candy. The familiar thrills and sheer number of 1980s throwbacks and pop culture references are great but they bring into question whether the Duffer Brothers are really doing anything interesting with Stranger Things or if its just a sugar rush. At least the Brothers are self aware about it, though. In the fifth episode when Lucas is explaining the events of last season to Max she has a cheeky line about how the story “has a few issues” and “is a little derivative at parts”. Good stuff.

The other main criticism I have is that when the Duffer Brothers created the character Barb in season 1, who was so pure and far too good for this world, and they (spoiler!) killed her off, you’d think they would learn to not do the same thing in season 2, but nope! I won’t say who it is, but there’s a Barb 2.0 folks, and I for one am outraged about it.

Despite its flaws Stranger Things 2 is an excellent watch, and is one the best seasons of television this year. Its emotionally evocative characters, perfectly accompanying soundtrack and popular culture impact makes for an extremely fun viewing experience and even more fun

conversations. If you have't watched it already, I recommend buying any leftover halloween candy from the store this weekend and binging the show, ideally with someone else who hasn't watched. It will be the best sugar rush of your life.