

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Caroline Kitchener: Hi, everybody. I am Caroline Kitchener. I'm an associate editor at The Atlantic. Today, we have Lenika Cruz on the phone. Lenika is an associate culture editor at The Atlantic. Hi, Lenika.

Lenika Cruz: Hi.

Caroline Kitchener: I'm very excited to have Lenika on today. She's going to be talking about one of my favorite shows, and I think one of a lot of people's favorite shows, Stranger Things. It's a sci-fi horror show that follows a couple of brave kids in Hawkins, Indiana, as they investigate the dark, magical forces that are wreaking havoc on their town. Pretty much as soon as it aired on Netflix last summer, Stranger Things became a hit. Lenika and I have been chatting about the show most days in the office since the second season came out, so I'm very much looking forward to having an extended conversation about it with you all today.

Before we get started, I want to quickly note that for everybody who hasn't seen all of season two, there will be spoilers on this call but not until the second half of the call. If you don't want to hear season two plot details, I will give you a heads up before we go into them, and you can go ahead and hop off the call.

A couple more things to mention before we get started, as always, I want to go over how these calls work. First, it's all about your questions, so please, please send them in to me. You can either email them to me at ckitchener@theatlantic.com, or to Matt at mpeterson@theatlantic.com, or you can submit them in real time through our conferencing system. To do that, for everybody listening on the call, you can also log in at social.maestroconference.com to give us your questions. There'll be a little chat window down at the lower hand corner of the screen. Go ahead and click on that, and then click on the Everyone tab. If you type your questions in there, Matt will go ahead and pass them over to us. Okay. Lenika, are you ready to get started?

Lenika Cruz: Yes.

Caroline Kitchener: Okay, awesome. I want to start with the big, general question. For our people who have never watched Stranger Things, give us a little bit of background. What is this show all about?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. Stranger Things has been sort of described as this homage to a lot of different '80s, like late '70s, early '90s films and pop cultural touchstones, but really, it's this story set in a small town in Indiana, a fictional town called Hawkins, and the first season started out with a young boy who goes missing, mysteriously. It's about his mother's and his friends' search to find him. He's kidnapped by this monster, who takes him to another dimension called The Upside Down.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

While that's all going on, there's also this second part to the story, where there's a young girl, who has been experimented on in this secret government research facility, and she has somehow received powers in the process. She escapes. She meets up with the friends of the young boy, Will Byers, who went missing, and they team up to try and figure out what happened to Will. This young girl, Eleven, is probably someone that you've seen mentioned around, because she sort of became the most iconic character of season one.

There's a lot of supernatural elements. People who are familiar with movies like E.T. and Close Encounters of the Third Kind will recognize echoes of those stories and those characters in season one and season two, but season two actually took on a slightly darker tone than season one in dealing with the trauma and the grief that a lot of the characters are experiencing as a result of the adventures and the traumas of season one.

Caroline Kitchener: That's a very good little summary for all of us. I think I was pretty late to the game for Stranger Things season one. I discovered it, I think it was in the fall, but it came out the summer of 2016 and pretty much became an immediate breakout hit, right?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. No, totally. Yeah, it became-

Caroline Kitchener: So ...

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. Sorry, go ahead.

Caroline Kitchener: Why was it so popular?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. It definitely became popular through word of mouth, which is kind of how Netflix plans for a lot of its original content. I think the show knew it had a potential hit on its hands. Sorry, I think that Netflix knew it had a potential hit on its hands. It didn't quite know how quickly that that was going to happen, how quickly that word of mouth would spread.

I think, in general, summer is considered this sort of the doldrums for TV releases, because most stuff debuts in the fall, and then in the spring. I think a lot of people out there are probably looking for original content to, or original shows, to latch onto, and it really did just ... Totally, it owes its success to word of mouth. I know people started picking up on this show and telling their friends about it, and I think with any word of mouth success, there's usually a sense of discovery, and feeling like you discovered something that is unique and special and that you can recommend to people. Especially now, when there's just so much original scripted content, I feel like word of mouth has a particular premium, and people will listen to their friends, and especially if all of their friends are raving about a particular show that they've never heard of it, I think that really connects with people and tells them there must be something special about this.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Yeah. Netflix made a wonderful calculation with Stranger Things, and I think the fact that this was a pretty little-known cast, with the exception of Winona Ryder, who plays Will Byers' mom, who, she's looking for him. Other than that, it was pretty much nobody knew who these young actors were. They were beautifully cast, and you had the creators of the show, the Duffer Brothers, had no real footprint in Hollywood before. They had done one feature film that nobody really knew about, and they had written stuff for M. Night Shyamalan's Wayward Pines TV show, but other than this, they really were this breakout duo. Yeah, Stranger Things clearly took on a life of its own starting that summer and then continuing through the rest of the fall, and even this year, people catching up to prepare for the hype that has built around season two.

Caroline Kitchener: That said a lot about what it is that makes people so excited about this show. I keep going back to this idea of nostalgia television. Stranger Things is based in the 1980s, and there's a lot of ... In this small town, and there's a lot of people enjoying going back to the way things used to be. It's really heavy on that nostalgia factor. It's familiar. It's in a comfortable place. I think a lot of shows now are playing up that nostalgia. I'm wondering, what does nostalgia television mean to you, and why do you think we, as viewers, are drawn to it?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I mean, it's a combination of things. Nostalgia is always this undercurrent in pop culture, no matter what time period you're in. We're constantly looking back at the things we used to love as children, the things that we grew up with, and I mean, nostalgia offers a certain degree of comfort and familiarity, especially now, like I was saying. There's just so much new TV and so many new movies, and that's why you see studios banking on franchise films with characters that people are familiar with, like they want to try to cut through the noise of all this new stuff and just say, "Here is something that you know that you love already, and just come back into this world again and be part of it," and you don't necessarily have to get used to a new story.

I think with Stranger Things, yes, it pays homage to a lot of these other ... It has nostalgia, clearly, for these '80s movies, and the Duffer Brothers, the creators, have been very open about that, but I think, at the same time, you don't need to necessarily have seen those movies and be familiar with those touchstones in order to have Stranger Things resonate with you. I think that the footprint that these movies, like E.T. and Close Encounters, and It, have in pop culture, as a whole, make them familiar to people, anyway.

Yeah. I think there's definitely a social and psychological utility to nostalgia. It offers you a place to go back to, and I think nostalgia, when it comes to pop culture, is a little bit different than nostalgia for a bygone time that you can never get back again. I mean, it's a little bit less politically fraught to say, "I love E.T.," than saying, "The '80s were great, and now, things are bad," because obviously, nostalgia is a little bit more problematic when you're ignoring the fact that things weren't great for all people at a certain period of time.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

I think for the most part, what Stranger Things really did, that a lot of other studios that are bringing back franchises, and adaptations, and reboots, they're all playing into this nostalgia, making a nostalgia play for viewers, but Stranger Things is, in the end, this original show. Yes, it drew from these very specific influences, but it also offered a new story, and so it offered this combination of the familiar and the new, and it was just familiar enough to make people comfortable with watching this show that they had never heard of and really responding to it. It appealed to people of all different ages, even younger people who maybe weren't as familiar with and didn't have the same affection for '80s movies.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah, absolutely. I can't not think about the fact that this major political campaign was just won on the slogan of Make America Great Again. That leaned pretty heavily on nostalgia. Do you think all this is connected, this resurgence of nostalgia in pop culture? Are we, as Americans, wanting to bring back a past time in this moment?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I mean, again, I think it goes to the same question of what people are comfortable with. Certain people don't want change, and for other people, change and moving forward is the main focus. Yeah, I do think that there is a tension there between wanting to go back to the way things were and wanting to move forward, and trying to figure out what to preserve of what was good in the past, and then also trying to make things better.

I think definitely, we see some sort of tension with that playing out in pop culture, where we're still very much mired in this ... Yeah. I mean, there's obviously a business interest in trying to group as much profit as you can out of existing intellectual property, and so you see, you could call it a lack of courage on a lot of movie studios' parts, just to be giving people what they're already familiar with and what they already like, and maybe not trying to be as visionary about rewarding original storytelling, but those things have always coexisted side by side.

For as much as we rely on franchises and reboots, you're also seeing things like, movies in particular like, this year, Get Out and Split were these surprise hits. They both also happen to be horror movies, and people thought that, "Oh, nobody watches horror movies anymore." Really, they don't make that much money. Neither of those things was based on an existing intellectual property or whatever, and they both also got great box office sales through word of mouth. I think there's definitely a parallel there happening with Stranger Things and some of these other, quieter successes that nobody saw coming.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah, absolutely. All right, so we've got a question from Rhonda, who's listening. She wants to know, how much of an impact do you think that the special effects and props featured in Stranger Things, how much of an effect is that having on the show's success?

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I think definitely given the amount of money that Netflix has poured in Stranger Things, I mean, it shows in terms of the production values on the show. Yeah. I would say that the special effects are a huge part of at least what drew me into it, and I think it created this very absorbing realism in the show, and I think that's probably the same for other people, too.

If you go back and watch some of these older movies, they didn't quite have that same level of realism, and to see that sensibility updated in this way, and to see them clearly spending time on making the monsters extremely realistic and terrifying, I mean, it's a horror show in part, in addition to being a sci-fi show. I think with horror, in order to make people afraid, you have to at least get them to suspend their disbelief a little bit, and one way to do that is, obviously, by making things as realistic as possible. Yeah, definitely the props and the set design, and all that, go to creating this authentic '80s look to the show, and that's, again, also really crucial to the brand and to, I think, why a lot of people were drawn into the show.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah. I want to step back for a second and talk about these online streaming platforms that seem to be taking over entertainment right now. Stranger Things is a Netflix original show. It's one of many Netflix original shows that have been absurdly popular, House of Cards, Orange is the New Black. What are some others that have been really popular?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I guess it's just hard to judge what popularity means, in the conventional sense with TV, just because Netflix doesn't release data on how many people watch their shows. You have this much more abstract and intangible sense of what is the buzz around the show. I think that was definitely the case with Stranger Things. Sorry, did I interrupt your question?

Caroline Kitchener: There's just so a bunch that ...

Lenika Cruz: Yeah.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah, no. There's just a bunch of Netflix that have been really, really popular. I want to talk for a second about these streaming services. Can you say a little bit about how these kinds of platforms, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, how did they get started, and why are they growing so fast?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I think, like a lot of people, I first got into Netflix because ... I mean, I used to get DVDs sent to me, and I would watch old movies. I would watch old TV shows that I had never seen before. I really thought of Netflix before as this library for content that had been released by other networks and studios originally. Yeah. It was this library of shows and movies, and not necessarily ... I wouldn't go into Netflix to watch something original. I think licensing those TV shows and buying the distribution rights to movies is very expensive, and so I think Netflix realized that that couldn't be its business model forever. It needed to get into the original content game.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Yeah. Like you said, it started with House of Cards. That was the first big show that it did, and that was back in, I think, 2013. That feels like it's really not that long ago, in terms of the number of years, but it does feel like a lot has changed since House of Cards, like you said, Orange is the New Black. You have Narcos. You have Making a Murderer. You have smaller hits like BoJack Horseman.

Netflix has been pouring billions of dollars into investing and making its own original content because, like I was saying before, Netflix and these other streaming services don't release viewer data. They just care about subscribers, for the most part, especially Netflix. They're focused on retention. They're focused on gaining new subscribers, and the way to do that is by offering these shows and these movies that people can't see elsewhere. Yeah. I mean, I think at this point, Netflix is at least 50/50, or that's the goal, and then they're aiming to be at like 75% original content, and then maybe 25% back catalogs and stuff like that.

As Netflix has grown, you see these other media companies coming up with their own streaming services and being like, "Why do we need to give Netflix our TV shows and our ... We can make money off of that." You see CBS with its own streaming service. You see Criterion Collection with its own streaming service. HBO Now, they have a streaming service that's untethered from the cable packages. Yeah. Netflix has changed a lot in the last just few years, and they're just continuing to on that path.

Caroline Kitchener: [crosstalk] No. Sorry, go ahead. We have a little bit of a delay.

Lenika Cruz: No, no, no. I was just saying, yeah, they're just heading down that path. They're still the industry leader on this trend, in terms of how much money they're spending. At the same time, I think it's worth noting that, for as much as Netflix has been the leader, in terms of original shows, Netflix still hasn't actually won the coveted Best Drama Emmy. They've gotten nominated a lot, but this year, Hulu won that for its very first real original series, and that was The Handmaid's Tale. That was kind of spoken of as this game-changer, and the sign that Netflix needs to step up its game. For as much money as it's spent over the last few years on this, they still very much care about things like critical acclaim, because in the absence of things like viewer data ... I'm sorry, in terms of releasing things like viewer ratings and stuff like, that has a lot of clout for it, and that is a way that it signals its value to potential subscribers and to existing subscribers.

Caroline Kitchener: We've got a question, jumping back to the nostalgia question, we've got a question from Morley, who says, "I'm not sure nostalgia explains the show's popularity with millennials who weren't born until the 1980s or later. Does the demographic profile of its viewers skew older and more rural Southern? That would be the only connection I can think of to Make America Great Again, et cetera." You go ahead. I have some thoughts on this, too.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. Yeah, I agree that I don't think nostalgia explains the show's popularity with younger viewers, because I didn't grow up watching a lot of these movies that the show is clearly referencing. I don't think that the show's demographic necessarily skews older or more rural. I think that would be too literal a connection between the nostalgia and what the demographic might be. I think the appeal is a lot broader. I think in the end, you really have to go back to the show's quality, and that's, I think, what Netflix is banking on, that it's spending a lot of money on this show and focusing as much as it can on the human story appealing, on making the characters as resonant as possible. I mean, just from what I've seen, looking at social media, there are a lot of younger fans and there are a lot of fans that definitely span different demographics. I think that's definitely the coveted, what is it, the four quadrant appeal, where you hit all these different age ranges, and I think Netflix does have that.

Kind of related to that, you can look at a show, like Riverdale, and that's sort of based on an existing comic book, but that has tons of appeal with younger viewers who maybe didn't read the Archie comics. I think the CW tapped into something that sort of transcended any particular knowledge of a set of cultural references, and I think that that's also what Stranger Things has done.

Caroline Kitchener: Absolutely. I'll just add to that, I'm a millennial. I don't have memories of the '80s, and yet I do ... I guess it appeals to me in a broader sense. I do still feel like this town that they have created, this 1980s town, it still feels familiar and comfortable to me, and I'm not quite sure why. I think there are a couple reasons why people watch TV shows. I think some people watch to learn a lot about things they don't know about, and then people also watch to be in a familiar and comforting environment.

It's interesting that I feel that way about Stranger Things, because all of these horrible things are happening in this familiar, comfortable environment, but maybe it is because I spent a lot of time growing up in a small town. But for whatever reason, I do feel that comfort element, even though the 1980s part of it is not so ... It doesn't take me back in my memory. I think that also speaks to the reason why Gilmore Girls, the TV show Gilmore Girls, was such a phenomenon. I have watched that show, and many people my age have watched that show dozens of times, and it's because it takes you back to this town that's very comforting and very familiar. Would you agree with that?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah, I totally agree. There's very little about the story of Stranger Things that relates to anything that has ever happened in my life, I mean, obviously not the supernatural stuff, but in terms of I didn't grow up in a small town. I moved around a lot. I didn't have the same sort of friends growing up. Yeah. None of that was there for me, and yet I have the same reaction. I binged the first season, but for the second season, I watched it a little bit more slowly, and I found myself, during the workday, being separated from the show and then find myself thinking back on it, and sort of yearning to revisit this town and to revisit the set of characters.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah. Yeah.

Lenika Cruz: I think part of it might also be just the fact that people love coming of age stories, and particularly really well-done ones that understand the interior lives of children and teenagers. I think that, so often, you're used to seeing adults rendering children from an unrealistic perspective, but clearly, a lot of these shows or these movies had a handle on that. I think there is definitely a sense of recognition, at least that the show is treating these children and taking their stories and their trials very seriously, and again, the whole kids on bikes thing is very, regardless of where you grew up or how you grew up, there's a sense of when things were simpler and kids weren't on their iPads all the time, or all that kind of thing. They went outside and played, and got up to crazy adventures. Yeah. I think it's a combination of all those things, for sure. Obviously, I think people might have different reasons for why it resonated, but I think you and I also had very similar reactions to why it rang true for us, even though we didn't grow up with E.T. and those kinds of movies.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah. Okay, so we're going to jump to the second part of our conversation now, and this is where we're going to start talking about some spoilers for season two. So if you haven't watched season two, want to watch season two, this might be a good time for you to hop off the call. All right. My first question for you, Lenika, as it relates to season two, is this a horror show? Is Stranger Things a horror show?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I think you could point to different things that happen, and different references that the show makes, and say that it is a horror show. It is definitely scary, and I would be hard pressed to look at certain elements and call it anything other than horror. It definitely scares you, but at the same time, it's doing more than that. It's not invested in jump scares. It's taking this higher minded view of horror and trying to use, like all the best horror movies do, use it to get at other things and other fears beyond just the monster that it presents right in front of you. It's commenting on things like grief, and trauma, and just the fears that these characters have, and it refracts that through the lens of horror.

Caroline Kitchener: Can you give us an example of that?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I guess we can talk specifically about the way that monster of season two ... Well, we're going to get into that later, but when Winona Ryder's character, Joyce Byers, loses her son, that is something that, even if you don't have a child, will resonate. You understand the fear of that. That fear is externalized as this otherworldly interdimensional monster that has taken her son. We're looking at this monster, and yes, it's terrifying, and it's gross, and we don't know anything about it, but at the same time, it is appealing to this deeper fear and this deeper anxiety that ... We see the effect that it has on her character, where she's going kind of crazy, trying to figure out what happened to her son, and the only way that she can communicate with him is through the lights. So she strings up

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

Christmas lights in this very iconic scene, where he uses it to communicate with her and lights up certain letters.

I think that there's something very prescient in the way that the show used its monster. It wasn't just like, "Oh, look how scary this is. It took the child," but it shows the gradual unwinding of Joyce Byers' sanity. I think one of the biggest fears that a lot of people have is not being believed, and that is something that she grapples with for the first half of the first season, in the sense that you are witnessing this terrifying and unexplainable thing happening, and there is nobody you can share that with, and you're completely in this alone. The only reason why she persists is because she's a mother, and I think, again, anybody who's watching this can empathize with her situation. Yeah. I think that that's why the horror is really effective. It weaves these emotional threads through the supernatural stuff that comes through. That really buttresses the overall narrative.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah. It kind of seems like horror is going through a bit of a renaissance period right now. Does *Stranger Things* have anything in common with other recent works of TV or movie horror that have been extremely popular? I'm thinking of things like, I mean, you mentioned *Get Out*, and also *It Follows*?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I mean, I think it's connected to those works on sort of different levels. *Get Out*, we talked about how they're both very self-referential, and they reference other works that viewers are probably familiar with. *Get Out* is more of a social satire, but it's drawing from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and it's drawing from just these other sorts of ... Yeah. Horror underlies it, but at the same time, it's not purely ... It's a social satire/horror mix in the way that *Stranger Things* isn't purely horror. It's also a coming of age story, and it's also sort of a sci-fi story.

I mean, the first thing I think of is that that's also this roughly '80s set ... I don't know if it's necessarily set in the '80s, but it's more of this anachronistic time period, but definitely a lot of the sensibility of *It Follows* and *Stranger Things*, in terms of the font choice, and in terms of the score, and this banding together of young kids to try and figure out this larger mystery. That definitely is a parallel, I think, with *Stranger Things*.

Caroline Kitchener: We have this fascinating question from Frank. Thanks for sending this, Frank. Frank asks, perhaps what's appealing is the tension created among what the audience sees, and what the kids see and experience, and what the adults gauge. The kids fears are real, though, even though the adults dismiss them. Frank says that he sees a link between women being dismissed when they claim harassment, sexual harassment. Do you see any link here?

Lenika Cruz: Oh, I totally do. I was thinking about this a lot, especially with season two, because like I was saying, in season two, there's this very clear undercurrent of looking at the way characters deal with trauma and deal with grief. I think, in

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

particular, the character of Will Byers, who, spoiler alert, comes back at the end of season one, and it's his story and his grappling with what happened to him in the Upside Down that forms the spine of season two. Just the way that his character talks about what's happening to him and how he keeps having visions of The Upside Down, and he's telling his mother this, and his mother is telling the doctor this, and it's being dismissed as PTSD.

That was nice, to hear a discussion of the variable effects of mental illness and the mental fallout of something like that. I feel like I can't help but also draw that connection with him not being believed, and him just saying, "Oh, this is just sort of in your head. It'll get better soon," which is why I think I was so gratified in season two, when finally, everyone put the pieces together and decided to believe each other just based on the fact of what happened in season one. We've overcome the biggest barrier, in terms of their belief. Now that they know supernatural things can happen, it's less of a logical leap to be like, "Okay, so maybe this other, worse supernatural thing can also happen."

Yeah. I think that's why his story really struck me, was because you're seeing it operating on these two levels, on one hand, the very literal, just like this is a monster who is traumatizing him and torturing him, at the same time seeing the way that children's concerns and the things that they describe, their stories are just not as believed.

Caroline Kitchener: Dismissed, yeah.

Lenika Cruz: I'm happy that the show didn't draw that out for the entire season, and found a way to put the pieces together and focus on solving the mystery, rather than making this about this child who's suffering in isolation.

Caroline Kitchener: Well, since we're talking about gender, particularly after season one wrapped up, there were just a ton of critiques in the media about how the show handled gender. Do you want to talk about a couple of those and how ... What the media picked up on, and then also what the show did to speak to those critiques in season two?

Lenika Cruz: Yeah. I guess, in season one, I think I was less tuned into the prior discussion of some of the gender critiques. I mean, I had written a story focusing mainly on Eleven and the way her character was treated at the end of season one, and I should point out that a lot of people disagree with me. I've gotten tons of emails, very, very angry emails, disagreeing with my interpretation of this, which is fine. My sister also told me she didn't think that I was right, and I've had a lot of coworkers be like, "Ah, I don't know if you got that ... Interpreted that quite correctly."

The point was, I had seen season one as doing this very fascinating thing with the way that it started out being a story about the disappearance of this young boy, Will Byers. He was sort of in the background for most of season one, and

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

instead, in the foreground was this character of Eleven, played by Millie Bobby Brown, who is wonderful. She's this young, British actress. I felt like it took this very original young character ... I mean, she's based on a couple of other characters, but at the same time, I think that the show had really done a lot to build up her backstory, and going into the pain of growing up in this government lab, and being essentially abused because, and used for her powers. I thought it did such a great job with that.

By the time it got to the finale, and she essentially sacrifices herself to save her friends, on one hand, I get that the martyr, hero sacrifice trope isn't problematic on its own, but I did feel this strange sort of emptiness, like, "Oh, I thought that she would become sort of the central figure, and we were going to get to watch her develop, and that's something, that her story wasn't going to be purely about pain." She was always trying to prove her worth to her male friends, who were constantly doubting her, and constantly pushing her out and pulling her back in. I found it very unsatisfying, the way that she sacrificed herself. I get that kids deal with loss in different ways, but it felt to me like the show had sort of dismissed her in a really weird way.

Then, when I went back and re-watched season one, there were little things that bothered me, in terms of how her character seemed to be more instrumental to other things, like they used her to help get Will back, and it seemed like, with a lot of the interactions with her and Mike, yes, it was partly about her growth, but it was also ... It seemed to me about him admiring her, and a lot of the scenes with the two of them were shot through Mike's eyes in this very uncomfortable way. Yeah.

I think in season two, there was a lot more material for people to look at and evaluate, in terms of gender. The show obviously brought Eleven's character back and did a lot more with her, and I was very interested to see what direction they went with her. Then, they also introduced these two other female characters. There was Kali, who turns out to be Eleven's, they call her like the long-lost sister, and she was also in the government research lab with her, and also has powers.

Then, while Eleven's off having her own adventure away from the town of Hawkins, there's this sort of weird like replacement character, named Max, that the boys ... She's a new student to the school, and the boys see her, and they think she's so cool because she plays video games, and she's better than them at video games, and she becomes just like another one of the gang. She's the new, cool girl that's part of their otherwise all-boy group. She's also trying to constantly prove her worth to them and being sort of ostracized by some of them. Yeah. Her character, most of all, didn't really get to develop that much. I mean, you'll see people who maybe responded to her a little bit more, but she was never really meaningfully integrated into the plot of season two as much as I think she could've been.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

The same thing goes for Kali's character. She gets this one main episode dedicated to the story of her and Eleven. As much as I really admired what they were trying to do with that on paper, I think a lot of the backlash to that episode, in particular, was warranted. I can go either way on that. I can see the importance of showing Eleven having this development, this moral dilemma that she has to deal with in order to figure out what kind of a person she's going to be and how she's going to use her powers, but at the same time, it felt, again, like how I felt at the beginning, or at the end of season one, where you brought in this cool character, and then you're not going to do more with her this season, at least.

Yeah. I think the show definitely tried, and I think it maybe fell victim to some of the mistakes that it made in season one with Eleven's character. I think it's still more comfortable with having character development and growth for male characters, like they gave Dustin, and Lucas, and Steve's characters a lot more meaningful screen time and development than they did with Max. For Max, I felt like the bulk of her development and her growth involved just showing the backstory of how messed up her family life was, and that was ... I get that we're trying to show that young kids even have complex and painful upbringings, but it didn't feel like that was enough. Hopefully, they'll do more with her in season three, and the same thing with Kali's character, but yeah, again, you could go both ways in the terms of how it handled gender.

Caroline Kitchener: Backing up to that backstory episode that you mentioned, we actually have a member who is unhappy with it. He wants to know why the Chicago segue. It seems like it really didn't fit into the main story, at all. Jack, I have to say, I agree. I did not like that episode, at all. Jack wants to know, was this a veiled attempt to prepare something for season three? What do you think?

Lenika Cruz: I don't think it's necessarily always fair to bring in what the creators have said and bringing that to bear on how we feel about the episode, but they seemed to think that this episode really was crucial, in some way. They defended for the exact reasons that a lot of people didn't like it. They felt like we needed a quick break and to leave Hawkins right before the big showdown went down in episode eight. That's the reason why a lot of people didn't like it, because it felt like a weird placement, and it feels weird to cut off the action for this totally unrelated story. I've also heard a lot of people say, "Just skip episode 11," I mean, sorry, episode seven. "You don't need it."

Caroline Kitchener: Really?

Lenika Cruz: Skip from six to eight. Six to eight, Eleven comes back, and that's fine. I do get that, for the purposes of showing Eleven's development, and actually giving her her first moral challenge, it was sort of necessary. I could've done without the weird punk crew, that was extremely cringe-worthy and gets worse with every re-watch that I do, but I still felt like the interaction between Kali and Eleven was interesting.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

That said, I would be surprised if they didn't revisit it in season three, just because they seem to really, really like the actress who plays Kali, Linnea Berthelsen, I think is her name. Originally, that character was supposed to be played by a man, and they did this whole casting and audition process, and they couldn't find someone that they thought fit the role. Then, they auditioned her, and they felt like she and Eleven had this very real chemistry together on screen, and so they decided to cast her based on that. I feel like, for a show that cares so much about capturing genuine interactions and really taking the story in the direction of wherever it seems like the chemistry is taking these characters, I feel like it's a really rich vein for the show to tap into in season three, both from a character perspective, and then also just, I want to know what's happened with these other ... If Eleven and Kali, who is number eight, are just two of the children that were experimented on, there's definitely at least nine other potential child subjects who could be brought back in.

At the same time, I think the show's probably wary, from a plot perspective, of just giving a bunch of characters powers, because that kind of hurts the suspense a little bit. It's like if you can have these all-powerful characters just solve the monster problem every season, then it's a little bit less ...

Caroline Kitchener: Right.

Lenika Cruz: Yeah, a little less suspenseful. Yeah. I hope that they make the Chicago episode worth it in the future. It would be, otherwise, really, really odd if they didn't.

Caroline Kitchener: There's something that I have wanted to ask you about. Something that I can't stop thinking about from season two are the striking images of domestic violence between Hopper and Eleven. You have Hopper isolate Eleven in this little cabin for an entire year and not letting her see anyone, and isolation is often a key element of domestic violence. Then, there's the scene where he's yelling at her and being physically aggressive. I think that I struggle with the scene because, actually after I watched it, I had somebody point out to me that this was domestic violence, and I did not ... Domestic violence is something I think about, I write about a lot, and yet I did not immediately classify that interaction as domestic violence. I think it's probably because I like Hopper a lot. I think he's a great character, and he definitely has my sympathy. I'm just wondering, did you have the same experience with that scene, those sequence of scenes, and do you think the show's creator recognize this as domestic violence?

Lenika Cruz: I think we were meant to be very uncomfortable with that interaction. I certainly was, and as much as I understood the reasons why Hopper was doing this, the reasons why he was reacting so strongly to Eleven, obviously, that came from a place of fear, and we know that because we know of his backstory with losing his daughter, which happened before the series even started, and it's clearly this motivation for him throughout the series, and explains why he does a lot of the things he does. That's crucial to his character, and so I think

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

that that was a very in-character and truthful thing for him to do, way for him to react.

I think, definitely, the fact that Eleven has these powers kind of makes the power dynamic a little different than it would if she were a child without the telekinetic abilities and the ability to throw him into the wall or whatever. But I still think that when you're watching that scene, it doesn't read that way. It doesn't read as two equals fighting against each other or yelling at each other. It does still have this darker element to it, where it looks like this large father figure yelling at this small girl, who has definitely gone through a lot, and who has been, like you said, isolated in this cabin for nearly a whole year. She's not allowed to go outside, and she's not allowed to really use her powers, and she keeps being promised that soon, it'll be safe for her to leave, and soon, she'll be able to potentially have a new life again and to meet her friends again.

That doesn't happen, so I understood her frustration. I don't think you can leave a child at home. I mean, there's definitely signs of neglect there. You're leaving at home. Yeah, she's being fed, but she's not, I don't think, being necessarily nurtured emotionally. Yeah, so I did feel very uncomfortable about that whole scene, and I think it was intentional. I don't know that the director, or the creators wanted us to read that as necessarily domestic violence, but they did point out in the show, the parallels between Hopper and Dr. Brenner, who had imprisoned Eleven for most of her life, and how both of them were doing what they were doing under the guise of protecting her. In Hopper's case, obviously, I think he was telling the truth, but it's hard for, I think, a young girl to have that situation replicated almost exactly and to not turn him into a villain or someone to run away from.

Caroline Kitchener: Absolutely. All right, so we've got one last question from John. John says, "I can't get enough of Stranger Things. I have watched the first season over and over." I'm right there with you, John. I watched it twice. Lenika, will there be a new season every year? What do you think?

Lenika Cruz: I'm trying to remember exactly how long the Duffer Brothers said that they were going to do the show. I think I would cap it at five. I think they said they want to wrap the story up in five seasons, or maybe it was four seasons. Yeah. I don't know how much bigger they're going to go for season three. It hasn't been officially announced yet, but I mean, obviously, they're going to make a season three. Just looking at how long it took for them, from the time that they released season one last summer, and then took a little longer than a year to release season two, and you're seeing a lot of shows taking a slightly longer than a year break between seasons. So if they wanted to go particularly big for Stranger Things three, I could see it ... I don't want to wait for after 2018, but we can see that happening. Yeah.

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Lenika Cruz, Nov. 20, 2017

I think they're going to take this as long as it makes sense. I don't think they're going to go into Walking Dead territory, where it seems like the show's never going to end, or like the Simpsons territory, where it goes on forever.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah. How many seasons was that on for?

Lenika Cruz: Oh my god, 20-something. I'm probably completely... [crosstalk]

Caroline Kitchener: No.

Lenika Cruz: Walking Dead is definitely going to go through like 10 seasons. Yeah. I think Stranger Things, Netflix is going to give us what we want, and they're going to give us new seasons, and they're going to give us these characters, and hopefully new characters. I would bank on at least having four seasons, if not five. Yeah, so fingers crossed for that.

Caroline Kitchener: Awesome, so lots more Stranger Things to look forward to. We're going to wrap it up there, everybody. I hope everybody has a wonderful Thanksgiving. We've got a really exciting call for you next week, as well. I'm going to be talking to author, best-selling, New York Times number one best-selling author, John Green, about his new book, which is Turtles All the Way Down. It's our official first Masthead Book Club pick. I'm halfway through. I can tell you, it's excellent. There's still time, if you want to read it before the call. Even if you don't get a chance to read it, it'll still be great to ask John Green questions and hear what he has to say. I'm looking forward to that, and until next week, everybody. Thank you so much, Lenika.

Lenika Cruz: Thanks.

Caroline Kitchener: Bye bye. Bye.

Lenika Cruz: Bye.