

Until You Discover Girls: *Stranger Things*, *Stand by Me*, and Heteronormativity

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Before *Stranger Things* (2016-2025) premiered on Netflix, The Duffer Brothers pitched the series to several networks as *Montauk*, an eight-hour miniseries inspired by the Montauk Project conspiracy theory (Mitchell par. 7). In their introduction, The Duffer Brothers write that *Montauk* was “[set] in Long Island in 1980 and inspired by the supernatural classics of that era” (1). Throughout their pitch booklet, which was stylized like a Stephen King paperback, The Duffer Brothers included stills from supernatural and science fiction films from the 1980s. Among these examples was an outlier—*Stand by Me* (1986), Rob Reiner’s film adaptation of King’s novella, *The Body* (1982). Instead of supernatural horrors, *Stand by Me* focuses on four twelve-year-old boys’ attempt to find the body of another child, Ray Brower. Along the way, the boys come to terms with parental neglect and grief. Since its release, *Stand by Me* has been associated with “the golden age of teen movies” (Freeman

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62). Realist roots notwithstanding, the film's influence on *Stranger Things* is palpable.

Scholars and fans alike have noted the aesthetic similarities. For instance, *Stand by Me* is one of the first films Rose Butler mentions in her essay on *Stranger Things* and 1980s youth cinema (72). Additionally, Melissa Vosen Callens argues that *Stranger Things* imitates the “tarnished nuclear family” dynamic that *Stand by Me* exposes (26). Less attention, however, has been paid to the texts' differing ideas about gender. In addition to misfit preteens journeying across train tracks in search of dead bodies, *Stranger Things* and *Stand by Me* both concentrate on the intensity of young friendships, especially among boys. The clearest difference, then, is in the way each text depicts girls.

Notably, *Stand by Me*'s co-screenwriters, Bruce A. Evans and Raynold Gideon, resisted pressure from several Hollywood studios to create a girl for their all-boy ensemble. Not only are girls absent from King's novella, but Evans and Gideon also wanted to tell “a coming-of-age story without girls or buying rubbers or first kisses or all of that” (Evans qtd. in Lang, par. 7). This lack of heterosexual tension is explicitly written into the screenplay. Midway through the film, as the boys build a campfire to cook dinner on their trek, the adult version of protagonist Gordie LaChance (Richard Dreyfuss) remarks in voiceover, “We talked into the night. The kind of talk that seemed important until you discover girls” (00:50:37-42). As Evans notes, *Stand by Me* is a film “about kids becoming aware of their own mortality” (qtd. in Lang, par. 6). It is also a film about the importance of boys learning to be emotionally vulnerable in front of one another. They do not require a girl to make that vulnerability more socially acceptable, nor do they

need to distract themselves by competing for her romantic affections.

Stand by Me, then, illustrates what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “male homosocial desire” (1). Sedgwick notes that the word *homosocial* is “a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual,’ and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’” (1). Consequently, she posits that the term is commonly “characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (1). Despite their relative disengagement from sexuality, the boys in *Stand by Me* (namely Gordie and his closest friend, Chris Chambers) do not allow homophobia to impede their intense connection. For instance, Gordie (Wil Wheaton) and Chris (River Phoenix) take turns sobbing in front of the other, and each time, they hold each other close for comfort. At the same time, the film liberally employs homophobic and misogynistic language to emphasize its cruelty. Ace Merrill (Kiefer Sutherland), the boys’ older bully, addresses Chris as “you little faggot” while threatening him with a knife (01:15:15). Ace’s choice of a homophobic slur for Chris is telling, as Chris is perhaps the least rigidly masculine of his friends. Still, since this epithet comes from the film’s antagonist, its connotations are cruel. More complicatedly, Teddy Duchamp (Corey Feldman), one of the four principal characters, often uses the word “pussy” to describe his friends when they show trepidation on their journey. Yet Teddy’s dependence on misogynistic language arguably derives from a longing to impress his abusive father, a World War II veteran, who is institutionalized. That is, Teddy’s frequent reminders that his father “stormed the beach at Normandy” reveal his belief that only militaristic masculinity is honorable (00:29:32-37). As such, his insults suggest overcompensation or a desire to perform militaristic

masculinity for his father's approval, even in absentia. Important, too, is that Teddy exclusively applies this language to perceived cowardice. He does not speak this way about Gordie and Chris's emotional intimacy with one another. Most of the time, he is either absent or oblivious to it. Teddy's language is unkind in any case, but he does not target Gordie and Chris for being emotionally raw with one another.

Also crucial is that Gordie and Chris do not employ homophobic or misogynistic vocabulary to insult the other. Although they occasionally use these terms to insult themselves, they each tell the other not to speak that way. Away from the other boys, they are less ashamed of their emotional expressions and intimacy. Reiner, Evans, and Gideon ultimately depict Gordie and Chris's affection as essential as they come of age. The exclusion of girls gives them no other choice. With no girls present, the boys must support one another.

On the other hand, *Stranger Things* has always been predicated on girls' participation. Their importance is especially evident through the character of Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown). In Season 1, she completes the focal misfit quartet; as such, her presence makes the tween cast resemble *Stand by Me* with a girl. Of course, she is more than simply "the girl" in a series about boys. From the series premiere to its finale, the story revolves around Eleven's ability to protect the world around her. Other young female characters also prove indispensable. Nancy Wheeler's (Natalia Dyer) sharp marksmanship enables her to perform myriad heroics, like killing Demogorgons in Season 1 and weakening the Mind Flayer in the series finale. *Stranger Things* may have opened on a group of lovable boys playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, but the

series' female characters propel the story. They are actualized characters, not props for the male characters' growth.

However, gender representation in *Stranger Things* is far from egalitarian, namely regarding romance. Unlike *Stand by Me*, which deliberately illustrates a time before sexuality becomes a priority, boys' attraction to girls is immediate and pressing in *Stranger Things*. This instant focus on dating establishes a heteronormative undercurrent that flows throughout the series. Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard) develops a crush on Eleven from the moment they meet, and their innocent first kiss is a culminating moment in Season 1's finale ("Chapter 8: The Upside Down" 1.8, 00:25:51). Moreover, Season 2 introduces a new girl, Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink). Because she is pretty and shares many of the boys' hobbies, Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin) and Dustin Henderson (Gaten Matarazzo) argue about which one of them should date her. These heteronormative underpinnings also affect *Stranger Things'* overtly queer characters. Will Byers (Noah Schapp) seeks a stronger emotional bond with Mike, his unreciprocated crush, yet Mike's preoccupation with dating Eleven hinders homosocial connections with his male friends. *Stranger Things'* intense focus on boys dating girls makes adolescent masculinity appear far more heteronormative than in *Stand by Me* and other 1980s youth films.

Mixed-Gender Group Dynamics in Youth Media

Mixed-gender friendships and group dynamics are common across youth media, from realistic fiction to more fantastic tales like *Stranger Things*. Much of the conflict among these characters stems from heterosexual attraction, especially when girls are in the minority. While not a supernatural serial, The WB's teen drama *Dawson's Creek* (1998 2003) models this

tension through the titular character (James Van Der Beek) and his female best friend, Joey Potter (Katie Holmes). The series, which revolves around romance and sexual awakening within a hyperintelligent group of mixed-gender friends, takes a heteronormative stance in the first scene of its pilot. Joey declines to sleep in Dawson's bedroom because they are fifteen years old, and "[their] emerging hormones are destined to alter [their] relationship, and [she is] trying to limit the fallout" ("Pilot" 1.1, 00:01:28 33). The phrasing reveals some crucial heteronormative assumptions. In particular, the word *destined* suggests that heterosexual attraction is inevitable in mixed-gender friendships, a viewpoint *Stranger Things* shares. Relatedly, *fallout* indicates that exploring such attraction is doomed. This perspective imbues young heterosexuality with a great deal of power, a common sentiment in youth-oriented stories long before romantic dramas like *Dawson's Creek*.

Interestingly, a great number of classic children's novels either complicate heteronormative structures or depict a world free of them. One notable example of the latter is Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), which follows Mole, Rat, Toad, and Badger—all male anthropomorphized animals—as they attempt to protect Toad from his reckless tendencies. The novel includes almost no female characters, focusing instead on capturing tender moments between male friends.¹ The primary quartet do not have wives or girlfriends, and the most important female character is The Gaoles's Daughter, a human child who assists Toad's escape from prison. She is not anyone's romantic interest, as the narrative does not prioritize romance (or subtle reassurance of its characters' heterosexuality) in any significant way.

Even classic children's literature that centers mixed-gender friendships do not always frame these relationships with

romantic potential. Two examples are Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) and Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977). Like *Stranger Things*, both texts focus on children taking fantastical adventures, and *A Wrinkle in Time* is a substantial influence on *Stranger Things*' final season. However, neither text forces its characters into heterosexual relationships. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, fifth-grade students Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke call themselves the king and queen of their paracosm. Crucially, there is no indication that this king and queen are a married couple. Even more important is that Leslie's tragic death prevents the two from entering adolescence together, which nullifies their heterosexual potential.

In contrast, in *A Wrinkle in Time*, L'Engle includes some romantic subtext between protagonist Meg Murry and her friend, Calvin O'Keefe. This attraction is nevertheless minimal and does not drive the novel's plot. Toward the middle of the novel, Calvin tells Meg she has "dream-boat eyes" and quickly adds, "I don't think I want anybody else to see what gorgeous eyes you have'" (61). While his intentions appear flirtatious, it is the only quasi-romantic moment the two share in *A Wrinkle in Time*. Calvin's words do not introduce a romantic subplot. Rather, L'Engle's focus in the first installment of her *Time Quintet* (1962-1989) is on Meg's journey to save her father from the planet Camazotz, where he has been trapped for years. Ultimately, Meg rescues her father, and L'Engle satisfies her arc without also giving her a boyfriend. Although Meg and Calvin are married with children in future books, L'Engle does not dwell on their courtship. The romance is more incidental than inevitable to the greater narrative.

A similar example from television is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) (1997-2003). The Scooby Gang comprises more

girls than boys, where many teen supernatural stories feature the reverse. However, whenever any of the female characters becomes aware of Xander's (Nicholas Brendon) sexual potential, it is not met with any sudden romantic fanfare. Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Willow (Alyson Hannigan) never vie for Xander's affections, and while Willow initially has an unrequited crush on him, her feelings predate the pilot. Xander and Faith (Eliza Dushku) share a singular encounter (barring her sexual assault on him in "Consequences" 3.15), and Anya's (Emma Caulfield) feelings initially annoy her. Even Cordelia (Charisma Carpenter), who finds herself unexpectedly drawn to Xander in Season 2, discovers this attraction while fighting with him, not through a protracted character arc ("What's My Line [Part 2]," 2.10). Usually, the Scoobies of *BtVS* challenge heteronormative expectations.

For instance, because Willow and Xander are childhood friends, it is not surprising when they finally kiss ("Homecoming" 3.5, 00:17:35). Still, this kiss does not catalyze a serious romance, as both parties are already in long-term relationships with other major characters. By framing Willow and Xander's romantic exploration as an illicit affair, *BtVS* indicates that succumbing to heteronormative pressures in a mixed-gender friendship is disastrous. The series fosters this idea throughout Season 4, as Willow discovers her attraction to women.

Buffy, too, regularly defies heteronormativity. As Lewis Call writes, Buffy's sexual preference for vampires over human men reveals "the painful fact that her sexuality is radically Other" (par. 33). Moreover, in the series finale, she is single ("Chosen" 7.22). Spike (James Marsters), Buffy's love interest in Seasons 6 and 7, dies after sacrificing himself in the Hellmouth. No heterosexual relationships are intact by the final scene, yet the

conclusion is satisfactory. As such, *BtVS* contests what Chiara Pellegrini calls “ideological complicity with a heteronormative insistence on a correct (happy) ending” (396). In comparison, *Stranger Things* partially insists on happy, heteronormative endings. The series finale, “Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up,” shows that Max and Lucas will likely continue their relationship after high school, while Jim Hopper (David Harbour) finally proposes to Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder). Like Buffy, Mike is single in the final scene because Eleven presumably dies sacrificing herself in the Upside Down, *Stranger Things*’ equivalent to the Hellmouth. It is uneven, but some heteronormative happiness is more than its absence in *BtVS*.

Throughout the twenty-first century, youth-oriented adventure stories have become increasingly heteronormative. Prior to *Stranger Things*, films like sci-fi thriller *Super 8* (J.J. Abrams, 2011) and quirky comedy *Moonrise Kingdom* (Wes Anderson, 2012) heavily emphasize tweens’ heterosexual relationships. In *Super 8*, a late 1970s pastiche and apparent predecessor to *Stranger Things*, fourteen-year-old Joe (Joel Courtney) and Charles (Riley Griffiths) ask their pretty neighbor, Alice Dainard (Elle Fanning), to help them with makeup for their zombie movie. Because she is the only girl in the production, it is apparent that Alice’s main purpose is for the boys to fight over her attention. Throughout the film, Abrams depicts Alice quite passively. She is the only member of the moviemaking group whom the mysterious creature abducts, and her friends—all boys—must rescue their damsel in distress. Near the end of the film, there is a close-up on Alice and Joe’s hands, reaching for one another—chaste, heteronormative reassurance (1:42:56). In retrospect, the moment anticipates Mike and Eleven’s first kiss in *Stranger Things*. They come of

age not simply by defeating monsters, but by fulfilling heteronormative mores.

Although not a supernatural story, *Moonrise Kingdom* is another important precursor to the young heterosexual romances in *Stranger Things*. The film follows two misfit children running away from home, one of whom is an orphan adopted by the lonely police captain, offering clear overlap with characters like Mike, Eleven, and Hopper. Suzy (Kara Hayward) and Sam (Jared Gilman), the children in *Moonrise Kingdom*, are committed enough to put on a play wedding in the film's second act. Of all the previous examples, *Moonrise Kingdom* is likely the most heteronormative. Neither Suzy nor Sam has same-gender friends, as they only rely on each other. For instance, Sam abandons an all-boys summer camp in favor of Suzy, an inverse of the no-girls-allowed camping trip in *Stand by Me*.

The most heteronormative aspect of *Moonrise Kingdom* is its frank depiction of child sexuality. Critics and scholars often draw attention Sam piercing Suzy's ear (00:42:27). It draws blood, which Manohla Dargis calls "a hilariously symbolic deflowering" (par. 3). Sam and Suzy's mutual attraction is also instantaneous, as though their respective sexual awakenings happened long ago, offscreen. They are not intimidated by each other's bodies. Suzy tells Sam she wants to kiss where "the tongues touch each other;" he is not embarrassed when she comments on his erection (00:45:20-00:46:02). Their views of one another are so laced with heteronormativity that they hardly seem like children. While the young romances in *Stranger Things* are less eroticized, their emotional intensity matches that of *Moonrise Kingdom*, indicating a new convention in youth-oriented adventure stories: children who approach their first romances with adult severity.²

This set of examples does not constitute a survey, and its goal is not to assert that a majority of mixed-gender dynamics in the twenty-first century are more heteronormative than their predecessors. Rather, these similar texts illuminate a possible shift toward more heteronormativity in youth-oriented adventure stories.³ As such, when one compares *Stranger Things* to its influences, especially *Stand by Me*, the heteronormative underpinnings might not be shocking. *Stand by Me* may have inspired The Duffer Brothers to develop *Stranger Things*, but the series is a closer contemporary of more blatantly heteronormative youth texts. *Stranger Things* is distant from earlier decades' comparative comfort with homosociality.

Heteronormativity, Homosociality, and Intertextuality

While heteronormativity is always present in *Stranger Things*, it is especially prevalent among Mike Wheeler and his friends in Seasons 2 through 5. Mike's crush on Eleven is well established in Season 1. Different than in other seasons, his feelings are often met with taunting and denial. Notably, Lucas, who does not trust Eleven when they meet, accuses Mike of only wishing to include her because of a crush. They share the following exchange:

LUCAS: You look at her all like, "Hi, El! El, El, El, I love you so much! Would you marry me?"

MIKE: Shut up, Lucas ("Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly," 1.3, 00:22:23-29).

In Season 1, Mike and his friends are twelve years old, around the age that some children develop their first crushes. Lucas is still young enough to find humor in Mike's feelings; likewise, Mike is young enough to be embarrassed by them. Also

interesting is that in Season 1, Mike is the only male tween to experience a crush. He is on a trajectory to date Eleven, but the series' heteronormative underpinnings are not as rampant as they will become.

The tween ensemble's gender composition is crucial in Season 1, as Eleven becomes Will's proxy in the group of male friends. By including Eleven, the series superficially "adds a girl," echoing the studio pressure that *Stand by Me* resisted in the 1980s. Of course, Eleven is not a heterosexual placeholder. In fact, her role in the overarching narrative is a *reversal* of "adding a girl" to a male-dominated adventure story, as she is the most pivotal character in the series. On the surface, some of *Stranger Things*' earliest episodes may suggest that Mike is the protagonist. He is one of the first named characters to appear, his friends gather for *Dungeons & Dragons* in his family's basement, and when he, Dustin, and Lucas look for Will in the woods, Mike is the first to notice Eleven ("Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers" 1.1, 00:02:57; 00:46:00). However, as the first season progresses, the audience discovers that Eleven is the hero of this story—a complex, compelling character in her own right, attractive to Mike not merely because she is a girl, but because she is heroic, powerful, and distinct.

Apart from her powers, one of Eleven's unique attributes is her physical appearance. As Emily E. Roach contends, Eleven's appearance (hospital gowns, bulky sweatshirts, and a buzzcut) gives her an "ambivalent gender performance" (139). She is a girl who does not always look or behave femininely, which is part of what prevents her from looking like a placeholder for any girl. Eleven is also not part of a love triangle with Mike and another boy, further indicating her role as a respected member of the group. Moreover, since Eleven was

raised apart from society, she did not learn the same stereotypical gender mores to which Mike and his friends adhere. After Mike brings her to his home for the first time, Eleven embarrasses the boys by attempting to undress in front of them (“Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street” 1.2 00:00:49). Because she sees little difference between herself and the boys, they occasionally blur their own gendered opinion of her. Eleven’s initial androgyny is part of what makes Season 1 of *Stranger Things* more closely resemble *Stand by Me* than any other season.

At the same time, the series’ heteronormative undertones are already present in Season 1. Regardless of her gender fluidity and chief importance to the story, Eleven is still positioned as a love interest for Mike, and his interest in her supersedes the intimacy between himself and his male friends. That is, Mike and his friends are hardly fragile around one another. Arguably, this lack of tenderness between young men is what differentiates the friendships in *Stranger Things* from those in *Stand by Me*. On the surface, the boys in *Stranger Things* are analogous to the characters that came before them. In particular, both Mike and Gordie are storytellers and unexpected leaders in their respective fights. One vital difference between them, however, is that in *Stand by Me*, Gordie can turn to Chris, who is more emotionally mature than the other boys in the quartet. The two share intense conversations about their respective futures, class discrimination, and their parents’ neglect. For example, Chris and Gordie fight about Gordie’s fiction writing because Chris knows that Gordie’s father, who “doesn’t give a shit about [him],” will not encourage his talent (00:35:43). This discussion is so intense that it is intercut with a sillier debate between Teddy and Vern (Jerry O’Connell), the other two members of the

quartet, who want to know if “Mighty Mouse could beat up Superman” (00:35:06). Interestingly, before the editing cuts to this comedic relief, the audience may not recognize that Gordie and Chris’s argument is unusually thoughtful for twelve-year-old children, let alone boys. The film frames their vulnerability with one another as normal for boys. They are invested in one another’s fears without shame or regret.

Mike, by comparison, has no equivalent to Chris. During Season 1, he and his friends become angry with one another, but they never emotionally break down. For example, consider Dustin’s anxiety about whether Mike values his friendship like he values Lucas and Will. Rather than an emotionally charged interaction, Dustin approaches these feelings with a blasé, dismissive air: “It’s fine. I get it. I didn’t get here until the fourth grade, [Lucas] had the advantage of living next door, but none of that matters [...] This girl shows up and starts living in your basement, and all you want do is pay attention to her” (“Chapter Six: The Monster” 1.6, 00:26:04–17). Dustin has obviously given this dynamic a lot of thought. By rushing through his words, then, it appears that instead of being earnest, he would rather convince Mike of his ambivalence. The subtext suggests that at this point in his development, Dustin believes it is embarrassing for male friends to reveal how much they mean to one another.

Perhaps more tellingly, he traces the change in the boys’ friendships back to Eleven’s arrival. Without a love interest of his own, Dustin still understands that having romantic feelings for a girl will interrupt male closeness. Michael DeAngelis argues that in stories of “intermale connections,” female love interests are typically “represented misogynistically as loving yet controlling and annoying interferences whose demands must always be ‘dealt with’” (4, 16). This is not precisely the case

with Mike and Eleven's budding romance. Not only are they children whose main priority is to find their missing friend, but also, Eleven is essential to the narrative. Still, that Dustin assumes Mike's interest in Eleven will follow this path reveals a heteronormative assumption that male friendships must always "compete with heterosexual passion" (Fiedler qtd. in DeAngelis, 6). In other words, Eleven's presence confirms what Evans and Gideon feared about adding a girl to *Stand by Me*'s ensemble. Once boys discover heterosexual romance, homosociality dissipates.

Even the visual language of *Stranger Things* indicates greater emotional distance than its predecessors. When Dustin asks Mike if Lucas is his best friend, the scene is primarily framed in full shots, emphasizing the fast pace of the boys' bike riding over their facial expressions. Compare this framing to Chris begging Gordie to pursue his writing. The boys are mostly depicted in medium shots and close-ups, which implies more intimacy between the characters and the audience. Gordie and Chris are also on foot, making it simpler to change their pace when they need to pay closer attention to the other's emotional nuances. A bicycle ride, on the other hand, includes more environmental distractions. It is easier to glide past emotional discomfort. The image of twelve-year-old boys solving a mystery on their bicycles aesthetically echoes *Stand by Me*. Ultimately, however, it is more akin to what Jason Sperb calls "representational nostalgia," or texts "set in the recent or historic with the conscious intention of appealing to some kind of nostalgia associated with that time" (20). Scenes like this one imitate the look of *Stand by Me* without simultaneously replicating that film's homosociality and emotional weight.

By the start of Season 2, the tweens' understanding of gender difference and heteronormativity is even more

pronounced. Now thirteen, Lucas and Dustin have also become interested in girls. More specifically, they are both interested in Max Mayfield, the arcade game prodigy who has recently moved to Hawkins from California. Erica Joan Dymond notes that in her first appearances, Max “has many of the traits commonly associated with the tomboy figure: she prefers the company of male peers, enjoys masculine-coded activities, displays a slightly more aggressive personality” (169). In this way, she is an ideal love interest for these boys. They like Max because she has many of the same interests they do, and ostensibly, dating her would not require them to sacrifice their more masculine hobbies. Put another way, Lucas and Dustin’s crushes on Max originate from the fact that she is (at least somewhat) gender nonconforming, down to her masculine-sounding nickname. In some respects, this fact may add queer underpinnings to the boys’ attraction. Yet, as Dymond writes, characteristics like Max’s “long, red, wavy hair” and pale-colored clothing are “strikingly feminine coded” (170). As a result, Max’s appearance affirms her femininity, and the boys’ interest in her is firmly heterosexual. Dymond compellingly adds that Max “is not the shorn, gruff-looking, grease-stained tomboy of the 1980s films that inspired *Stranger Things*” (170). While Dymond positions Max’s gender performance as progressive defiance of a stereotype, this connection to 1980s cinema is key. It demonstrates that when compared to the more comfortably androgynous gender roles in 1980s youth films, *Stranger Things*’ pattern of reassuring heteronormative gender roles is apparent.

Throughout Season 2, there is a love triangle between Lucas, Max, and Dustin, but the boys are somewhat nonchalant about it. Most surprising is that neither Lucas nor Dustin appears worried about what it could do to their preexisting friendship. It is as if their bond, which precedes the pilot, is

suddenly expendable upon meeting a girl. For instance, when Max joins the boys for Halloween in “Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” (2.2), the three are fairly harmonious. Neither Lucas nor Dustin attempts to outdo the other to impress Max, who stands between them (2.2, 00:38:36). In *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws from Rene Girard’s famous model of the love triangle, wherein Girard highlights the charge between the triangle’s romantic rivals. Sedgwick notes that Girard sees “the bond between rivals [...] as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved” (21). Rhonda Jackson Joseph notes that in Season 1, Lucas and Dustin are part of a group that is “loyal to one another, and [feels] a responsibility towards the other members of their group” (158). Accordingly, one might expect a stronger fight over what it means to like the same girl. This type of fight never occurs, even when Dustin loses connection with the group halfway through the season.

In fact, the rift is more about Dustin feeling forgotten by *all* of his friends, not just Lucas. Max has already shown more interest in Lucas, and while realizing this fact may be an unspoken reason for Dustin’s separation, it hardly rises to the text itself. No one yells; no one makes an impassioned plea to keep the group together. Dustin simply disappears on a secondary adventure without the primary group particularly aware he is gone. Even *Super 8*, heteronormative in its own ways, includes a scene where Charles admits it hurts to watch Joe fawn over Alice “because [he likes] her” (1:06:34). The alleged intense loyalty within this group is missing, something that never happens to the homosocial group in *Stand by Me*.

While not analogous with a heteronormative love triangle, contrast Dustin’s departure against Chris and Teddy’s fight

over Teddy's effort to dodge a moving train. After pushing Teddy off the tracks, Chris screams at him, "I'm just trying to save your life, man! You wanna kill yourself?" (00:17:47- 50). His face is red, his tone is harsh, and he acknowledges the extremity of Teddy's behavior. He fights for Teddy's security in a display of unwavering loyalty, which *Stranger Things* often misses. No one fights for Dustin with similar intensity. Now that Max is part of Lucas's life, his priority is to keep her there, weakening his established male friendships.

There is still a permanent rift in Lucas and Dustin's friendship. As Stephanie Lytle remarks, most love triangles in youth-oriented fantasy narratives require "souring friendships" after a girl makes a "final choice between two eligible boys" (1). Max's decision to date Lucas splinters his friendship with Dustin, which is never fully addressed. Beginning in Season 2's latter half, Dustin fosters a close intermale bond with Steve Harrington (Joe Keery), with whom he spends most of his time in Seasons 3 through 5. Their relationship is usually less weepy than what the audience sees in *Stand by Me*, but Dustin develops emotional vulnerability and openness with Steve. Their relationship even results in the series' most direct visual recreation of *Stand by Me*. In Season 2, their walk along the train tracks to find the baby Demogorgon, D'Artagnan, pays homage to the aforementioned scene where Chris begs Gordie to keep writing. Still, where the characters in *Stand by Me* discuss what they mean to each other in the face of parental neglect, Dustin and Steve center girls and heteronormativity. The scene begins with Steve criticizing Dustin for "[keeping] something [he] knew was probably dangerous in order to impress a girl" and "trying way too hard" ("Chapter Six: The Spy" 2.6, 00:24:54 25:16). Sharon Bird notes that for most heterosexual men, intermale bonding depends upon "the sexual objectification of women"

(122). After most of the boys' heterosexual awakenings, this is true for *Stranger Things*. Young men's friendships focus on impressing girls.

Despite Dustin and Steve's friendship beginning with advice about girls, they mean a great deal to one another as individuals. In Season 3, when Russian guards chase them through their secret lab, Steve stays behind to give Dustin a better chance at escape. Dustin shouts, "I won't forget you!" ("Chapter Six: E Pluribus Unum" 3.6, 00:01:30 38). The moment plays somewhat comedically, but Dustin's pause implies genuine fear that Steve may die. His fear of Steve's death comes to the fore in Season 5 after they have spent several episodes arguing. Steve tries to find a way out of the crumbling Hawkins Lab, and Dustin pulls him back, sobbing, "If you go on there, you're gonna die, and I can't deal with it again. You can't die 'cause I can't deal with it again [...] Not you" ("Chapter Six: Escape from Camazotz" 5.6, 0:41:07 18). Dustin's *again* refers to Eddie Munson's (Joseph Quinn) death in Season 4, another older boy close to Dustin. His addition of "Not you" also suggests that for as much as Dustin loved Eddie, imagining Steve's death is more painful. Their friendship is deeply important to both of them. In the series finale, neither Steve nor Dustin is in a serious romantic relationship with a woman. The last time the audience sees them, they are together, embracing as Steve visits Dustin at his university towing a trailer for a male-bonding camping trip ("Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up" 5.8, 01:52:32). Dustin learns about emotional openness from older boys, which helps him to mature. Yet, for the most part, he does not display the same emotional openness with his peer group, which may be the consequence of "losing" the competition for Max.

Dustin never blames Lucas and Max's relationship for this distance, although it is the indirect impetus. Instead, the series frames Lucas and Dustin's drifting apart as a natural part of growing up, and indeed, it is. As young people evolve, their friendships will change for various, multifaceted reasons. For example, when the boys enter high school, Dustin is disappointed in Lucas for being more interested in basketball than *Dungeons & Dragons*. Nonetheless, that a competition for a girl's attention initiates these changes between Lucas and Dustin demonstrates the profound effect of heterosexuality on same-gender friendships.

Consider Season 2's finale, "Chapter Nine: The Gate," when the children attend the Snow Ball. Aviva Briefel calls this winter formal an "upside-down world of heterosexual horror," which is especially true for Dustin, who must attend this "heterosexual ritual" without a date (pars. 14, 8). When Steve drops Dustin at the dance, he says, "So, remember, once you get in there [...] you don't care" ("Chapter Nine: The Gate" 2.9, 00:49:01-06). This pep talk is about Lucas having "won" the girl, further centering heteronormativity in the group's dynamic. Equally important is that Steve, whom Dustin "looks up to [...]" as the ideal embodiment of masculinity, due to his good looks and sexual prowess," dispenses this advice (Mollett 5). If Steve, whose opinion Dustin truly respects, believes boy-girl pairings are not to be disturbed, then he must be correct. Unsurprisingly, Dustin takes this advice to heart. As Lucas and Max slow dance, he glances at them uneasily, but he never accuses Lucas of betrayal ("Chapter Nine: The Gate" 2.9, 00:51:35). He never objects at all because, as Steve advises, he must not care. In Hawkins, heterosexual dating is inextricable from the adolescent experience. This point is emphasized further in the Season 3 premiere, when Dustin returns from summer camp

with a long-distance girlfriend named Suzie (Gabriella Pizzolo; “Chapter One: Suzie, Do You Copy?” 3.1, 00:22:40). The inclusion of this relationship implies that the cure for homosocial fracturing is a new heterosexual pairing. Contrastingly, the boys in *Stand by Me* need not worry about “upside-down [worlds] of heterosexual horror” (par. 14). Their story concludes before they can ever enter junior high school’s heteronormative rituals.

Another homosocial bond interrupted by heteronormativity is between Mike and Will, especially since Season 2. Though Mike is similar to Gordie in *Stand by Me*, he lacks a parallel to Chris throughout Season 1. Once Will returns from the Upside Down, he is the closest Mike has to that type of friend. From Season 2 onward, Mike and Will share “numerous heart to hearts” about fear, trauma, and their own relationships (Tisdall par. 7). Different from Mike’s previous scenes with characters like Dustin, he and Will usually sit side by side. Sitting still and close allows them to concentrate more intently on what the other is saying, and they do not talk to their other friends in the same manner. Importantly, however, Mike and Will’s relationship is unbalanced. Will has an unrequited crush on Mike, whose preoccupation with dating Eleven hinders their closeness.

For instance, while Lucas and Dustin trick-or-treat with Max, Mike and Will sit on the Wheelers’ couch as Will shares his ongoing connection to the Upside Down (“Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” 2.2, 00:44:36). Both boys are framed in tight close-ups, signaling the intimacy of this moment. Will tells Mike not to tell the other boys about his experience because “they won’t understand” (2.2, 00:45:31). Considered through the lens of homosociality, Will’s claim that Lucas and Dustin would not understand is compelling for two reasons. First, it

reenforces the notion that Will is different from other boys around his age, which is how Joyce describes him in the pilot: “He’s not like me. He’s not like most” (“Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers” 1.1, 00:17:29–32). In this way, Will overlaps with Gordie in *Stand by Me*, who worries his friends think he is “weird” (00:34:01). Second, Will implies that Mike *can* grasp what he feels. He trusts Mike with his insecurities, which is why he waits until Lucas and Dustin are not present. Scenes like this one echo the campfire scene in *Stand by Me*, where Chris waits until Teddy and Vern have fallen asleep to cry with Gordie about how everyone in their town, including his teachers, assume the worst of him (00:57:56–00:58:12). Both Will and Chris wait to confess their fears until the person they see as their homosocial confidante is alone. When Will treats Mike this way, The Duffer Brothers’ inspiration from *Stand by Me* is apparent.

On the other hand, this scene—and most other heart-to-hearts between Mike and Will—is haunted by heteronormativity. In *Stand by Me*, Gordie and Chris share “horizontal homosociality,” which Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson describe as “relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship” (5). Mike and Will cannot fully fit this description because their feelings for each other are not equivalent (platonic versus romantic). The series continually prioritizes Mike’s romance with Eleven over any of his other bonds. For example, despite Will’s serious emotions, this conversation still serves Season 2’s plot, which is largely about Mike finding Eleven. It does not slow down the story to focus on homosocial tenderness, as the campfire in *Stand by Me* does. Additionally, Mike transforms this discussion into one about Eleven. After Will assures him that Lucas and Dustin would not understand, Mike’s immediate

response is, “Eleven would” (“Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” 2.2, 00:45:37). From this point forth, the discussion centers Mike’s feelings for Eleven. The scene ends with the following words between Mike and Will:

MIKE: Sometimes I feel like I still see her. Like she’s still around, but she never is. I don’t know. Sometimes, I feel like I’m going crazy.

WILL: Me, too.

MIKE: Hey, well, if we’re both going crazy, we’ll go crazy together, right?

WILL: Yeah. Crazy together (2.2, 00:45:47 00:46:14).⁴

This conversation features some of same gentle homosociality as *Stand by Me*. Mike emphasizes the unity between Will and himself, somewhat like Gordie’s request for Chris to join him for the advanced courses in junior high (00:56:31). Still, what begins as Will’s attempt to bond with Mike becomes a reason to discuss his girlfriend. On the one hand, it is logical that Mike wants to talk about Eleven. They have been apart for nearly one year, and Will – one of Mike’s closest friends – has never met her, a girl who has become incredibly important to him.⁵ Mike wants to include Will in this new part of his life. The difference is that Will is uninterested in heterosexual dating rituals, much to Mike’s eventual irritation. Their mismatched goals for their friendship creates tension and emotional distance as they become teenagers.

During Season 3, Mike displays increasing ignorance of Will’s longing for a profound relationship with him. Early in the season, Eleven and Max break up with Mike and Lucas, respectively, after Max suggests the boys do not respect them. Following these breakups, much of the boys’ motivations in

Season 3 derives from a desire to win the girls back. The prospect of unattached friends excites Will, who writes a new *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign to celebrate “a day free of girls” (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3, 00:08:04). He announces this campaign in a close-up, which highlights the importance of this all-male adventure. Will wants to return to a time before heteronormativity affected his friendships. Mike and Lucas briefly indulge him, but as soon as the Wheelers’ phone rings, Mike answers hurriedly: “El?” (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3, 00:20:14). For Mike, it is more important to have a girlfriend than to spend a day with his male friends. He embodies Sujay Kulshrestha’s assertion that it is “unlikely that men have to rank the male-male and male-female relationships in their lives by order of importance or significance” (par. 6). Since Eleven has been his girlfriend, Mike follows the heteronormative assumption that his relationship with her should always rank highest, even when they are apart. Compare this day to the journey in *Stand by Me*, also a day without girls. If girls are never part of the narrative, their absence is not as strongly felt.

Mike and Will’s proceeding argument further emblemizes the imbalance in their relationship, as Will’s queerness becomes more apparent. Will cries, “You’re destroying everything, and for what? So you can swap spit with some stupid girl?” (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3, 00:21:30–34). His verbiage is extreme, and as a queer teenager who does not fully realize his own sexuality, heteronormativity frustrates him. In consequence, when Mike responds, “It’s not my fault you don’t like girls,” he others Will based on Will’s queerness without recognizing it (3.3, 00:21:36). The following close-up on Will’s hurt expression is a reminder that “gay men are excluded” from intimate friendships with

straight men (Hammarén and Johansson 7). Will does not accept heteronormativity, and from now on, that will create a wedge between himself and Mike. When Mike notices Will's pain, he attempts reason: "I'm not trying to be a jerk, OK? But we're not kids anymore. I mean, what did you think, really? That we were never going to get girlfriends? That we were just going to sit in my basement and play games for the rest of our lives?" ("Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard" 3.3, 00:21:42-53). Here, Mike establishes heterosexual relationships as an inevitable sign of growing up, like Lucas and Dustin learn in the previous season. They are becoming men, and in Mike's view, being a man means having a romantic relationship with a woman.

The weather also profoundly affects this scene. Mike and Will stand in the Wheelers' garage in the pouring rain, which almost overpowers their dialogue. They are framed in blue-tinted silhouettes with little emphasis on their faces. This is a rare instance where boys cry in front of one another in *Stranger Things*, and the visual language is cold and detached. This moment is far removed from the way Chris cries in front of Gordie in *Stand by Me*. Chris sobs in front of a campfire's warm, orange-hued embrace, thereby encouraging Gordie to hold him closer (00:59:19-21). In fact, there are no campfire scenes in *Stranger Things*—not even in Season 4, where Mike and Will's road trip from California to Indiana might make one logical.

Admittedly, Mike also struggles to share emotional intimacy with Eleven. In Season 4, after they have been in a long-distance relationship for several months, Eleven confronts Mike about why he never tells her that he loves her anymore ("Chapter Three: The Monster and the Superhero" 4.3, 00:18:29-31). What distinguishes Mike's emotional vulnerability with Eleven is that with her, he is eventually able to beat his

discomfort. Notably, in Season 4's finale, Mike helps Eleven battle Vecna by finally saying, "I love you [...] I'm sorry I don't say it more. It's not because I'm scared of you [...] But I am scared that one day you'll realize you don't need me anymore. And I thought that if I said how I felt, that it would somehow make that day hurt more" ("Chapter Nine: The Piggyback" 4.9, 01:31:38 01:32:04). He does not share many similar moments with his male friends. Because Mike is the protagonist's boyfriend, his deepest emotions are understandably reserved for her. Nevertheless, for a series reportedly influenced by films like *Stand by Me*, it is curious that Mike does not tend to share similarly vulnerable moments with other young men. For Mike, this level of earnestness is most necessary for heterosexual romance, and his male friendships do not require comparable attention.

Although Mike is emotionally reticent with all of his friends, his hesitance toward Will stands apart because his story is deeply linked with that of Eleven. In all five seasons of *Stranger Things*, each haunts the other's relationship with Mike. Eleven's escape from Hawkins Lab catalyzes Will's disappearance, and without either event, Eleven and Mike would not have met. Joyce also fosters Eleven in Season 4, turning her into Will's makeshift sister. Thus, Mike often spends time with Eleven and Will simultaneously, which highlights his comparative distance from Will. For instance, as Mike professes his love for Eleven to help her fight Vecna, Will stands over his shoulder, watching and listening. As Laura Tisdall remarks of Season 4, "there are basically no images of [Mike and Eleven] [...] when [Will's] not there" (par. 8). Her assessment is accurate, especially considering it is Will who encourages Mike to share his feelings with Eleven at this moment ("Mike, don't stop, OK? You're the heart. OK,

remember that. You're the heart!" ["Chapter Nine: The Piggyback" 4.9, 01:31:16 19]). Throughout Season 4, Will desires Mike's deep affection, evinced by the painting he made for "someone he likes," his embarrassment when Mike declines a hug, and his complaint that Mike is "not interested in anything [he has] to say" while they are at Rink-O-Mania with Eleven ("Chapter One: The Hellfire Club" 4.1, 00:11:00-01; "Chapter Two: Vecna's Curse" 4.2, 00:06:13; 00:58:08 09). Because Will is not receiving Mike's love, Will must listen to Mike express those feelings for someone else.

Further, Will's queerness prevents *him* from being completely open with Mike, as it may result in embarrassment or rejection. As such, Will uses Eleven as a proxy to disguise his own crush. For instance, consider their conversation in the back of the Surfer Boy Pizza van in Season 4, as they save Eleven from Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine). It is another of Will's attempts to be emotionally intimate with Mike. It also resembles some of Gordie and Chris's campfire talk in *Stand by Me*, where Chris wishes he "could go someplace where nobody knows [him]" (00:58:55 59:01). Will fantasizes about a perfect life with Mike, saying, "El could make us, like, super rich, and we'd never have to work. We could just play *D&D* and Nintendo for the rest of our lives" ("Chapter Eight: Papa" 4.8, 00:14:54). Here, Will describes a fantasy Mike previously used to criticize him. This time, however, he *includes* Eleven in the fantasy. When Mike expresses fear that Eleven will outgrow him, Will cries, "These past few months, she's been so lost without you. It's just she so different from other people, and when you're different, sometimes, you feel like a mistake. But you make her feel like she's not a mistake at all!" ("Chapter Eight: Papa," 4.8, 00:17:04 24). As Will speaks, his face is framed in a tight close-up with few reaction shots of Mike, making it

difficult to discern if he knows Will is talking about himself. The minimal use of two shots emphasizes the imbalance between what Mike and Will want from one another. For Mike, this is a conversation with his close friend about the young woman he loves. By contrast, for Will, this moment carries the risk of admitting his queerness to his straight friend. Because Will has unrequited romantic feelings for Mike, their heart-to-hearts cannot carry the horizontal homosociality of a film like *Stand by Me*. The Duffer Brothers and their team may attempt to create moments that echo their cinematic influences, but these efforts are unbalanced in a way that their predecessors are not.

Conclusion

Throughout its five-season, ten-year stay, *Stranger Things* has habitually “never [chosen] a lane” regarding queer representation (Proffitt 167). In some ways, The Duffer Brothers are far more conscious about the need for queer characters onscreen than their forerunners could have been. Their original pitch booklet for the series describes Will as “a sweet, sensitive kid with sexual identity issues” (13). *Stranger Things*’ queer characters are intentionally present in the narrative, where a queer reading of *Stand by Me* (and other films of its ilk) relies on subtext and reading against the grain. Positive intentions, however, are only part of the equation. The Duffer Brothers and their team may have planned for Will to be expressly queer, but the series simultaneously affirms heteronormativity. Because dating girls is a near-immediate fixation for the boys, the series endorses the concept that heterosexual romances must always outrank same-gender connections. By comparing *Stranger Things*’ heteronormativity to the more tender homosociality of *Stand by Me*, the series’

references to that film become hollower. The aesthetics of such 1980s youth cinema carry complex social connotations, and ultimately, they expose present-day regression where gender and sexuality are concerned.

Notes

¹ There is compelling overlap between Toad, whose fascination with motor vehicles endangers his life, and Teddy Duchamp in *Stand by Me*, who attempts to dodge a moving train.

² This sampling of mixed-gender friendships omits several equally rich examples, especially in children's literature. In particular, see Eustace and Jill in *The Silver Chair* (C.S. Lewis, 1953), Digory and Polly in *The Magician's Nephew* (Lewis, 1955), Danny and Irene in the *Danny Dunn* series (Raymond Abrashkin and Jay Williams, 1956-1977), Encyclopedia and Sally in the *Encyclopedia Brown* series (Donald J. Sobol, 1963-2012), and Pepper in *Good Omens* (Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, 1990), who insists she should count as a boy among her friends.

³ In addition to the films this essay analyzes at more length, many other recent youth adventure texts prioritize heterosexual awakening in their mixed-gender friendships. Some examples include Disney's animated spy series, *Kim Possible* (2002-2007), the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* book series (Rick Riordan, 2005-2009), the animated feature *Monster House* (Gil Kenan, 2006), and *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Suzanne Collins, 2008-2010).

⁴ This conversation parallels another horizontally homosocial youth film, Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of *The Outsiders* (1983), based on S.E. Hinton's 1967 novel of the same name. When comparing themselves to the other boys in their gang, Johnny says that he and Ponyboy are different (00:56:08). Ponyboy adds, "Shoot, kid. Maybe *they* are" (00:56:10-12).

⁵ This claim acknowledges the fact that Eleven appears to Will in Season 1's "Chapter Seven: The Bathtub" when he is about to be captured by the Demogorgon. However, it is unclear if Will saw or remembers Eleven, and they do not meet in the flesh until Season 2.

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