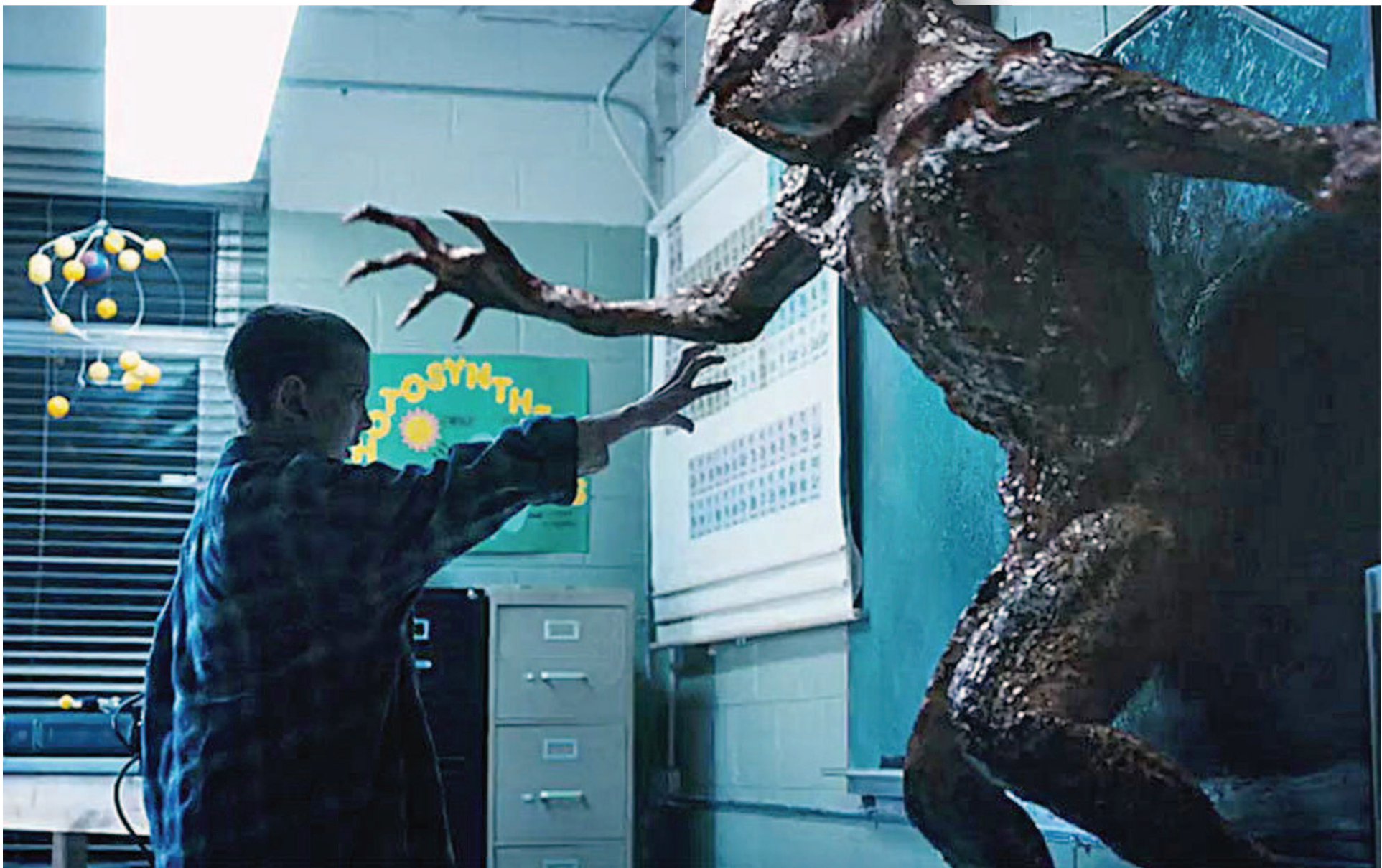


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The character Eleven, played by Millie Bobby Brown, does battle with the monster in “Stranger Things.”

Netflix

GIVE ME GOOD HONEST DREAD OVER PG-RATED MODERN HALLOWEEN

Best frights come from ancient horror stories intertwined in the DNA of our subconscious

By MATT WINTERS
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“Stranger Things,” the creative Netflix series that snagged so much attention this year, drills down into our longing for the inexplicable. It taps into the fact that beneath our bland rationality many of us secretly dream of walking around a street corner some morning and finding an open door into a mind-popping new reality.

As the philosopher Joseph Campbell observed, “It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.”

The characters in “Stranger Things” happen upon a savage beast in an upside-down version of the physical world, but the more deplorable enemy is a Dr. Mengele-like scientist experimenting on a girl gifted with extraordinary powers.

It reminds me and others of the 1986 movie “Stand By Me,” the Stephen King book “It” and Steven Spielberg’s 1982 “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial” — among other pop-culture references. Hopefully, the part 2 that’s now been commissioned won’t be a bloated, self-important disappointment, as the second season of “True Detective” turned out to be.

Watered-down Halloween

Touching something fresh and scary is — or at least used to be — the core appeal of Halloween. There’s much to regret about what Halloween has become — its vapid commercialization, the imitation chocolate-flavored corn syrup that passes for candy. It substitutes cartoons for supernatural terror. When I was a boy in the 1960s, Halloween was the main night of the year when a kid might hope to encounter frightening things — at least in our thoroughly sheltered little town. Back then, “frightening things” consisted of teenage siblings jumping out of closets waving papier-mâché skulls. Nowadays, there’s an awful cargo of gruesome content on the news and during primetime every night of the year, so most parents understandably go out of their way to keep Halloween fun and light.

I think there’s something to be said for getting thoroughly scared once in awhile. What most appealed to me about “Stranger Things” were the hints in it of the kinds of shivers that used to make life more delicious when we were 11 or so. There’s something about that age: Old enough to suspect there are monsters that Mom and Dad don’t know about, but too young to know the actual man-made horrors that stalk the world.



The Warren Magazine Collection
Creepy magazine was designed to send chills down the spines of 10-year-old boys.

Our lives are better when we remain in awe of the ancient unknowable spaces between rational existence and a universe that will never give a damn about human rules.

When I was still about 8, my parents didn’t object to my friend Warren and me pedaling our bikes miles along a busy reservation road where antelope, horses, dogs, feral cats and the occasional pedestrian were struck by speeding pickups and cars. We used to melt the lead cores of car batteries on his mother’s kitchen stove and pour the molten metal into ice water to see what shapes and sounds it would make. Our firecracker battles were epic. My friend Cale and I once climbed several levels down into an abandoned goldmine shaft, tied together with clothesline “for safety.”

But the things that scared me were of an entirely different nature. Warren’s older brother had copies of Creepy magazine that I didn’t like to even have in the same room during sleepovers. With garish covers and black-and-white illustrations of demons lurking in the dark, Creepy and its sister publication Eerie were the modern equivalents of the blood-infused stories shamans once told to keep villagers close to the fire-light centuries ago. For a good idea of what they were like, online you can find original versions of Grimm’s fairy tales. Captured by German ethnographers more than 200 years ago from villagers for whom they still possessed a visceral reality, they are far from the watered-down versions commonly known today. They weren’t kid stuff.

Those old stories, and even their ghoulish pen-and-ink derivations in Creepy, har-



StephenKingsit2017

A forthcoming remake of Stephen King’s classic horror novel “It” may be just the thing to inject a little more fright into walking alone after dark.

ken to the kinds of mythological themes that Campbell made a chief focus of his career. Although their disciples may object to the comparison, Campbell and pioneer Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung were each captivated by the ways in which certain stories, themes and images reverberate through the human subconsciousness. It’s like especially infectious tales become intertwined in our DNA and come seeping out from time to time.

Underground themes

Oddly enough, what got me thinking about all this was seeing a modern plastic root cellar in a Facebook advertisement. Sort of a prefabricated, watertight bubble with molded steps, they are lowered into trenches and then covered with soil. Since the temperature underground stays a fairly constant 50 degrees or so, such storage compartments are a venerated way of keeping things like apples and potatoes from spoiling.

There was nothing hermetically sealed about the ones I grew up around. There was a semi-collapsed one at Warren’s family ranch where canning jars forgotten about back in his grandmother’s time lurked like toxic chemical grenades, some cracked open and oozing poisonous rotten contents — home-canned tomatoes that long ago sold their souls to Satan. Botulism, the deadly pathogen that can form in imperfectly sealed food containers, always struck me as a kid as a kind of vicious trick on the unwary, a

Writer’s Notebook

hint of evil behind the surface of the world. (Now mostly known via its medical use in Botox, botulism’s latest use is cringe-inducing: If you dare, see www.maxim.com/news/scrotox-2016-10.)

I can smell the dry rot and sweet decay of that space today, the rock-hard reservation sun filtering through cracks in the log walls, dust motes crossing back and forth through beams of light and absence.

Scary spaces

The really scary root cellar, though, was the one at our mine in the Wind River Mountains. It probably was particularly good at what it was intended to do — chilly even on a hot August afternoon. Lacking electricity in what was virtually a ghost town, light never seemed to penetrate to its depths, and black widow spiders scurried out of sight whenever the screeching metal-clad door was opened. Candidly, it would still creep me out to go in there today, a space that seemed to swallow up the warmth and breathe out a cold emptiness. I can imagine all too well the door slamming locked behind me and an Edgar Allan Poe scenario unfolding: Death by forgotten starvation or by claws silently reaching out from the living darkness.

It isn’t a big leap from root cellars — essentially crypts for food — and the passage tombs that housed our ancestors’ bones back in the Neolithic Age. It’s believed they sometimes played an active role in religious rituals, serving as a kind symbolic doorway between ordinary reality and whatever lies beyond. Elsewhere in the world, even when underground passages don’t house corpses and ashes, they still often serve the function of separating everyday existence from the realm of the spirits and gods. I recall crawling through one in the Central Highlands of Peru and emerging into shocking daylight on the other side, an experience long ago designed by priests who little imagined how far into the future their stagecraft would survive.

We need something more than superhero movies and creepy clown rumors to inject mystery into our lives. It’s time to restore more of the hidden meanings of once-potent events like Halloween, giving young people a feeling of what it is like to not know it all. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our science.

Our lives are better when we remain in awe of the ancient unknowable spaces between rational existence and a universe that will never give a damn about human rules.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal. He lives in Ilwaco.