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Down to Puck: Why Women Are Going Wild for 'Heated Rivalry'

The Canadian series with explicit male-on-male sex scenes has tapped into a long-overlooked corner of the audience — and caught Hollywood by surprise

BY SETH ABRAMOVITCH DECEMBER 22, 2025

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Thursday nights at the Poliquin household in Vancouver, British Columbia, are set aside for appointment viewing. That's when new episodes of *Heated Rivalry* — the steamy gay hockey drama that has everyone buzzing — drop on premium streamer Crave in Canada and HBO Max in the U.S.

Not everyone joins in on the fun. The family's two children, 11 and 13, are dispatched to their rooms. Matt, the dad, wanders off to the kitchen. It's just Joy, a 45-year-old mom, who's planted on the couch, eagerly awaiting every horny hookup between the show's hunky protagonists: Russian Ilya Rozanov (played by Texas-born Connor Storrie, 25), star center of the fictional Boston Raiders, and Shane Hollander (Canadian actor Hudson Williams, 24), team captain of the also-fictional Montreal Metros.

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"It was getting a lot of promo, so I was like, 'I'll check it out. I don't think this is going to be my thing,' " says Joy, recounting how she discovered and fell in love with the show, scripted and directed by Jacob Tierney (creator of the cult Canadian comedy *Letterkenny*) and based on the popular book series by fellow Canadian Rachel Reid. "Obviously, the stars are beautiful. But the pleasure is presented in a different way. It's very reciprocal. There's lots of consent. They're always checking in with each other, which is incredibly attractive to watch."

Joy is hardly the show's only female fan — indeed, legions of women across the globe are tuning in, from Australia and New Zealand to Spain, with streamers in the U.K. and Ireland soon to follow. Against all odds, in a twist virtually nobody saw coming, a modestly budgeted Canadian drama featuring raunchy, borderline-graphic male-on-male sex has become one of streaming's biggest recent hits thanks in a very significant way to females — straight, bi or otherwise.

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"You'd never think it," Tierney says. "But the baked-in audience for this is women. It's wine moms. They love this stuff. And the thing that is so interesting is that the people that *don't* know about it are gay men. The women have been waiting for this — and the gay men don't see it coming."

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As it turns out, there's a long-hidden history of women quietly consuming male-to-male romance and erotica. It goes all the way back to the 1970s, and half a world away, to when female manga artists in Japan began experimenting with stories centered on romantic relationships between men. By the 1980s, the genre exploded beyond Asia to become a DIY phenomenon globally, with fans pairing off popular anime and other pop culture characters into fantasy relationships — what's known as "slashfic" (here in the West, *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock were a popular early pairing).

"Women would circulate photocopied zines of their slashfic at general fan conventions," explains sex researcher Lucy Neville, author of *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys: Women and Gay Male Pornography and Erotica*. "They'd sniff out the other perverts."

When the internet arrived, those stories exploded in scale. Communities formed on platforms like LiveJournal, Tumblr and Archive of Our Own, creating a vast, mostly female-driven literary universe that eventually found a foothold in mass-market publishing, with books like *Special Forces* and *Captive Prince* centered around gay male couples but aimed at female readerships.

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"The males in these books are reconfigured," says Guy Mark Foster, a professor of 20th century American literature at Maine's Bowdoin College who has studied the genre. "They're not toxic men. They are not dating multiple people at one time. They are interested in their partner's pleasure — not simply their own pleasure."

Eventually, inevitably, Hollywood took notice. Its first major foray into the oeuvre was Netflix's 2022 adaptation of Alice Oseman's popular 2016 webcomic *Heartstopper*, about two British schoolboys who fall in love. Then, a year later, Amazon dropped *Red, White and Royal Blue*, a feature film about an affair between a president's son and a British royal. Both projects performed well enough to prove the genre could not only find a mainstream audience but also mint stars (*Royal Blue*'s Nicholas Galitzine will be starring next year as He-Man).

Still, both were relatively mild portrayals of gay romance — more PG than hard R.

Enter *Heated Rivalry*, the most balls-to-the-wall erotic programming to hit screens since Skinemax. While not hardcore porn, the show does go well beyond suggestion, with plenty of full nudity, extended sex scenes, depictions of oral and penetrative intercourse as well as mutual masturbation — all presented with top-rate production values, idealized perfect male bodies and storylines that leave plenty of room for romance and even affectionate dialogue.

Who knew? It turned out to be exactly what female viewers have been longing for all along.

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"It was my first stab at *any* kind of writing," says author Reid. "I just did it out of boredom. I needed a creative outlet when I was raising young kids."

A native of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Reid has been a hockey fan for most of her life. But some aspects of the sport's culture made her feel "sad and angry," she says. "One of the big ones is homophobia. I kept thinking about how difficult it would be to be a closeted NHL player. I wanted to write a book where a player did come out and found happiness and love."

The result was 2018's *Game Changer*, the first book in what would quickly become a series. The debut novel features neither Ilya nor Shane — its characters are Scott, a pro hockey player, and Kip, a barista and grad student (they're introduced in the show's third episode). More books followed, including 2020's *Common Goal*, a May-December matchup between a retired goalie and a college student that Tierney affectionately refers to as "*Call Me By Your Twink*."

The books were best-sellers for Harlequin well before Tierney turned *Heated Rivalry*, Reid's 2019 installment, into a TV show, having sold 650,000 copies. Now they're sold out on Amazon and occupy the top slot on the Kindle charts.

Tierney is the last person you'd expect to be a voracious consumer of romance novels. A scraggly 46-year-old former child actor (he lived in L.A. as a kid and shared an agent with Ryan Phillippe, occasionally booking roles on shows like *Touched by an Angel*), the Montrealer in the horn-rimmed glasses and the five-o'clock shadow looks like a tortured screenwriter, not a wine mom.

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Heated Rivalry was not shoved into Tierney's hands by a pushy producer. He was turned onto Reid's books during the pandemic and fell in love with them on his own. "A friend said, 'Why don't you listen to some audiobooks?' and *Heated Rivalry* was one of the first I listened to," he says. "I was like, 'Boy, these books are spicy.' But it's also funny, it's smart — and a very compelling love story."

Tierney was working in reality TV as executive producer of *The Traitors Canada* when he read a *Washington Post* article about romance novels being a billion-dollar industry that doesn't get taken particularly seriously. "Then it noted that hockey romances are especially popular," he recalls. "I literally gasped." In the article's second paragraph, there was a mention of *Heated Rivalry*. Panicked that another producer might beat him to it, he reached out to Reid on Instagram. Luckily for him, Reid turned out to be a *Letterkenny* fan. They bonded over a mutual love of hockey and Canadian pride. She agreed to sell him the rights to her books.

"Then I kind of soft-pitched it," he continues. "I was like, 'We got these books. It's this gay hockey smut.' And everybody went, 'Really? Tell me about *that*.' The level of lean-in to my elevator pitch was huge — which I wasn't expecting."

In writing the pilot, Tierney took great care to "script the fuck out of these sex scenes." He was also methodical about finding the right actors to play Ilya and Shane. "It couldn't be a thing where every day they're like, 'Do we have to do this?' I needed a certain amount of buy-in," he says, "and I got very lucky with the actors that I cast."

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Reid has theories as to why women are so drawn to her material. "A lot of my female readers prefer to not have a woman in the book because of their own, usually dark pasts with sex with men," she says. "They prefer to get lost in a fantasy where there's nobody there that they can relate to directly. They don't want to insert themselves into these sex scenes. It just feels safer."

She also thinks there's an appeal to the kinds of men she writes about — men "who are emotionally vulnerable, who are maybe just a little bit different from the partner they have or the ex that they had."

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Then there's just the basic math of human sexuality. If you like penises, the thinking goes, two are better than one. "Men like lesbian porn," Reid reasons. "So why wouldn't women like this?"

For sex researcher Neville, those numbers add up. She points to Pornhub, which is "quite generous with its data" regarding who is viewing its content. "For a decade now, male-male porn is the second most common choice among female viewers. The last time I checked, approximately 46 percent of people watching man-on-man scenes were women," she says.

Neville has conducted research studies of women who exclusively consume male-male romances. "Quite often, they are the victims of sexual violence, rape, sexual assault — often when they were quite young — and they felt really alienated from the entire concept of heterosexual sex," she says. "They just find it really triggering. Men together was something they could just watch and enjoy sexually, romantically, without having to really engage with some of the more complex stuff going on with their feelings about their own sexuality."

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Foster has published papers on the phenomenon and has found no tidy explanation. The professor agrees that some women feel liberated by the omission of objectified female bodies. They can also be stimulated by the absence of male toxicity. But there are other, more nuanced factors at play.

"Sigmund Freud has famously said that everyone is born with a predisposition toward bisexuality," he says. "A lot of women writers of slash romances have admitted to having been tomboys in their earlier life. When women are mandated to give up being a tomboy as they mature, these books allow women a means to explore a suppressed male identity."

Joy, the *Heated Rivalry* superfan with a husband and kids in Vancouver — who, by the way, identifies as queer — thinks the genre helps bridge a gender divide. "It shows men who have shut down parts of themselves to survive beginning to live authentically," she says. "This is often true of women in the roles we are expected to play every day — there are unspoken expectations that are hard to escape, including how we show up as sexual animals and what we can desire."

As for Tierney, he doesn't have much time these days for theories — he's barely had a moment to pop his head out of the editing bay to enjoy the show's success. At interview time, he was still cutting episodes five and six, and soon he'll need to start planning for an already-ordered second season. "That will largely be based around *The Long Game*, which is what Shane and Ilya's other book is called," he says. "I'm going to put some other stuff as well from the other books to keep the fans happy, which is my pleasure."

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Fans are happy, all right. Even the NHL, which in recent years has been trying to broaden its appeal to gay sports fans with LGBTQ-themed events and nights, has expressed delight with the program.

"There are so many ways to get hooked on hockey and, in the NHL's 108-year history, this might be the most unique driver for creating new fans," a league rep tells *THR*. "See you all at the rink."

Ironically, about the only ones who haven't been totally on board with HBO's hit show about gay hockey players are … gay men. To be sure, gay men have embraced the show in large and enthused numbers. (WeHo bars have been playing host to packed and boisterous viewing parties.) But a faction of them object to what they see as a co-opting and neutering of gay sexual desire for female audiences. Jordan Firstman, who stars on HBO's *I Love LA*, kicked off a firestorm of controversy when he declared in a *Vulture* interview that the sex in the show "is not how gay people fuck" and that the series caters to people who "want to see two straight hockey players pretending to be gay."

Firstman ended up walking back his comments on Instagram ("I love *Heated Rivalry* and ultimately I'm a faggot who can't shut the fuck up," he posted). Later, in a show of network harmony, he appeared all smiles alongside Hudson Williams at an HBO Max promotional event in Century City.

But Firstman hasn't been the only one complaining. A withering review in *The Guardian* says the show "is content to exploit gay culture without understanding it in a meaningful way. … There is a weird kind of fetish in these works that de-sexes gay men just enough to make them palatable, like pets for young women." Another line of attack likens the show to when bachelorette parties invade gay bars — a practice frequently scowled upon by gay patrons.

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Tierney is well aware of the Firstman drama ("He's been sending my cast apology messages, and other castmembers of that show have reached out to us and apologized on his behalf," he says) and other critiques, all of which he waves off.

"We as queer people need to check our messaging," Tierney says. "The things that we decide women can or can't do can be really exhausting. Women are allowed to write about men. They're allowed to write about gay men. The question should be, *how* are they writing about us? Is it with empathy? Is it with allyship? Is it with kindness? Why are we looking for enemies here instead of looking for allies?"

Back at Joy's house, at least, there is no shortage of queer allies. She has turned all of her girlfriends onto the series. They're excitedly planning a viewing party (husbands and boyfriends are welcome to join but probably won't) for the first-season finale, which airs the day after Christmas — Boxing Day in Canada.

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"I just need to get through the holiday season," she says. "Then I can put all of my focus and energy back into *Heated Rivalry*."

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