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She Put the Heat in 'Heated Rivalry'

Thanks to a steamy television adaptation, Rachel Reid's romance novels about closeted hockey players have become mainstream best sellers.

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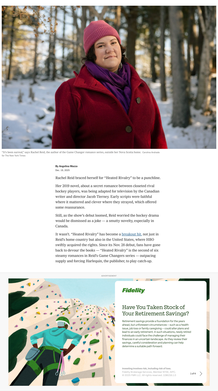

Kristen Gaines, who Rachel Reid, the author of the series "Heated Rivalry," calls her first fan in Canada. | Photo credit: Ian Willms for The New York Times

By Angelica Mesiti
July 7, 2026

Rachel Reid braced herself for "Heated Rivalry" to be a punchline.

Her 2019 novel, about a secret romance between closeted rival hockey players, was being transformed into a television series by producer and director Jacob Tierney. Early scripts were faithful where it mattered and clever where they strayed, which offered some reassurance.

Still, as the show's debut loomed, Reid worried the hockey drama would be dismissed as a joke — a steamy novelty especially in Canada.

Instead, "Heated Rivalry" has become a hockey lit, not just in Reid's home country but also in the United States, where HBO swiftly acquired the rights. Since its Nov. 20 debut, fans have gone back to devour the books — "Heated Rivalry" is the second of six steamy romances in Reid's Game Changers series — outpacing supply and forcing Harlequin, the publisher, to play catch-up.

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"People keep messaging me to ask if we have any in stock," said Claire Tarzina, the co-owner of Jim de Livres, a romance-focused bookstore in Montreal. "It's really quite the trip when your favorite thing gets discovered by the world."

Sports Romance: A Game-Pack
Hockey, figure skating and ice dancing are prominent in these romances set in winter.
Nov. 11, 2025

Last week, "Heated Rivalry" along with several of Reid's other novels, made the New York Times best-seller list. Reid — whose fans call her Rachel — has been flying to Toronto from Calgary a dozen times from home near Halifax, Nova Scotia, far from how she had appeared weeks earlier, in a quiet hotel lobby in Montreal's Old Port, where she was the day of the series premiere.

That was before fans on social media and beyond discovered over the crush-inducing story of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, the captains of the Montreal and Boston hockey teams, when romance novels featuring men in love were a niche genre. Or, if they have become especially notable for its unusually explicit, carefully choreographed sex scenes.

Years ago, Reid, 55, said she explained to her children that hiding the Times list was unlikely, especially since her early books rarely appeared in brick-and-mortar stores. "It's been normal," she said. "Great very, very lucky."

Hannah Williams (left, and Kristen Gaines) at Jim de Livres, a small-town bookstore, drawn Hollander and Ilya Rozanov in "Heated Rivalry." | Photo credit: Ian Willms

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Harlequin has now sold more than 650,000 books in the Game Changers series, according to Brent Lewis, the press's executive vice president and publisher. "The community around these books felt like a small town before the show," he said. "Overnight, it became a big city. We couldn't be happier for Rachel."

Reid's fascination with hockey began in childhood. "I always thought it was so cool that the guys who were playing Canadian hockey would make them respect me, which was ridiculous."

She played for a single season at 14, when her town allowed her to join a boys' team, there was no girls' league. "I went to hockey camps, took power skating — anything that let me wear the gear I loved," she said. Just I got to play just enough to know what it felt like.

Her love of the sport was complicated. "Many things made me question why I was so devoted to it," Reid said, citing multiple sexual assault and misconduct cases that were unaddressed by Hockey Canada. Instead of pursing a career, the players "were celebrated — you'd see them in The Hockey News."

Her fandom left her crave ardent romances that she stopped reading for years. "But I always came back," she said. "I would tell myself to do it. I can't help it. I really really love the game."

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Reid published "Game Changer" the first novel in the series, in 2019. She had written constantly as a child, but by adulthood had grown self-conscious about sharing her work. "I'm not great at being vulnerable," she said.

Writing fiction — especially fiction that included sex — felt newly fraught. Reid had been sexually harassed by a boss (whom she now has husband) that she had written it. Instead, she began posting each chapter anonymously to the fanfiction site Archive of Our Own, recasting her characters as figures in the Marvel universe. (Reid said she later realized that the platform allowed readers to comment on her work, "which I didn't know.")

After gathering feedback from readers, she took the chapters down and sent the manuscript to publishers. Even once it was set for release, she said, "I had a hard time telling people I had a book about to come out."

Jacob Tierney | Photo credit: Ian Willms for The New York Times

While "Heated Rivalry" was released in 2019, it took nearly a year to gain traction. Then the romance novelist Cat Sebastian, one of Reid's favorite writers, recommended it on social media. "That was a real turning point," Reid said. Readers began to discover her work. Her next two novels, "Heartbeat" and "Boyfriend Material," sold out in 2021 "The Long Game," the sixth book in the series, which continues Shane and Ilya's story, made the USA Today best-seller list.

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Her most recent novel, "The Illeth Tea Salon," a stand-alone hockey romance published in March, is more melancholy than her earlier books. Reid wrote much of it in the months following a Parkinson's diagnosis.

Though not entirely unexpected — Reid had noticed a constant tremor in her hand, and her mom's mom had a shock. "Hearing the words is a lot," she said.

Not long after, momentum around the television adaptation accelerated. Promotion began, the audience grew faster than she had imagined, and the series was renewed for a second season. "I'm train hard stopped," she said.

For Reid, romance is first and foremost a character study. "You're not reading romance for the plot, you're reading romance for what's about them, you're not going to be interested in their stories." That sensibility drives both the Game Changers books and Tierney's adaptation. Audiences are drawn not just to Shane and Ilya, but to the wider cast of teammates, who evolve across the series.

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Though her stories revolve around professional hockey players, Reid works to make each one emotionally distinct. Tierney's goes back to her earliest reading life: as a child she was captivated by "The Baby-Sitters Club."

A Stacey book, she remembered, felt nothing like a Claudia or Mary Anne book. Reid's goal is to give readers the same emotional return in — any where they could find their and carry in different characters over time.

Wide women make up the bulk of her fans (as for most romance writing), many men — including former hockey players — say the books and the series hit uncomfortably close to home. Some write to thank Reid, others admit they struggle to keep reading because the characters remind them of teammates they miss. Reid is not a fan sports, but it's also kind of a compliment," she said. The adaptation has amplified the response: "I've never gotten this many emails. Tens and tens, from all over."

Most exciting to Reid has been the hockey world's response. Former professional players have contacted her to say they identified; Canadian news outlets are interviewing former players about homophobia in the sport. During Pride Night at Montreal's Bell Centre, the adaptation's trailer played on the Jumbotron.

"There are boys kissing on the Jumbotron during an N.H.L. game!" Reid said. "This is kind of incredible."

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Reid with copies of the novels which have led to the hit television series "Heated Rivalry." | Photo credit: Ian Willms for The New York Times

The last episode of "Heated Rivalry" will air on Dec. 20. Next month Reid will announce her next book, another standalone hockey romance. On the health front, she said, "I've finally been diagnosed with Parkinson's and I'm dealing with it, and I'm going to focus on doing things that will make it better."

Even so, she feels pressure to travel and attend as many events as possible now. "I don't know how much longer I'll be able to go books-comfortably," she said.

Before "Heated Rivalry" hit the air, Reid was skeptical that her work could make a difference. Now, her outlook is markedly more hopeful. She said "Heated Rivalry" made men's hockey toward that change.

"Everything I didn't think was possible is happening," she said. "I think it's definitely starting a conversation."

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