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She wrote 'Heated Rivalry,' the red-hot hockey romance that became the steamiest show on TV

Sarah Wilkinson's novel inspired the Rogers hit series, which stars Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, and the adaptation is now being sold to other countries

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TV's will, between the show's leads Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in Sundance's" says "Heated Rivalry" author Rachel Reid, seen at the Toronto premiere of the Crave TV series of the hit romance.
Marcel Fleming/Crave

By Sue Carter Special to the Star

Before the free world premiere of the molten hot Crave drama "Heated Rivalry" in Montreal last month, Rachel Reid warned the show's stars, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, that things might get intense.

The Nova Scotia author knew it was a huge deal that the MPA-guest hockey romance novel had been adapted into a six-part television series, but even she didn't realize how big it would be. Since the series, which has been sold to streamers in Europe and the United States, lifting up early in the afternoon for the sold-out 7 p.m. screening at the Image and Nation Queer Film Festival.

They travelled for the first in-person appearance of the series' gay-playing Canadian Shane Hollander (Williams) and Russian Ilya Rozanov (Storrie), the protagonists of Reid's novel — the second in her six-title "Game Changers" series — about rival hockey players whose relationship graduates from on ice competition to a passionate secret romance.

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Screaming erupted as Reid and the actors walked into the lobby. "It was like the Beatles landed," said Reid. "People lost their minds." Afterwards, she required assistance to escape the crowd so she could attend another event.

And the TV series has only got better since then. Crave announced on Friday that it has been renewed for a second season — that after becoming the streamer's No. 1 original series debut and growing its viewership almost 400 per cent since its Nov. 28 release. Even more viewers are destined to take in the drama, with new deals in stream it in Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Written, directed and produced by Jacob Tierney ("Letterkenny"), the show's Canadian-Russian romance has been lauded for its sizzling sex scenes (two hours total gone), with fans sharing their love and lust on social media.

Thanks to the chemistry of the leads and Tierney's faithfulness to the source material, "Heated Rivalry" is a rare a cultural phenomenon.

The print edition of the book is currently sold out and, within days, the ebook had notched the top spot in the Kindle store. And in this era of ebooks up, the TV series is a boon like life, a Canadian production with a massive audience south of the border, where it sits on HBO Max.

"It's wild, because this show is based on a book that never had wide distribution in bookstores," said Reid, who runs a family owned promotional product company on her day job.

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Actors Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams attend the Toronto premiere of "Heated Rivalry" at the TIFF Lightbox.
Marcel Fleming/Crave

For those unfamiliar with romance fic, this might sound like overnight success, but the story has been following Reid's literary career over the past seven years, it's overdue recognition.

There are already TikTok accounts, fan fiction and other tributes dedicated to the "Game Changers" series. Reid, who jokes around and shares insights with her fans on Instagram, has been selling her books in Canada, the U.S. and anti-friendship hotspots. Williams and Storrie now have growing collective fans.

"I think (Reid) does a really good job of making the characters feel believable and building depth," said Shelly Zeelenet, a self-proclaimed "huge fan" of the book series. "They don't feel like caricatures.

"Sometimes, especially in male-male romance fiction, the characters can seem all one note, they're all the same sort of stereotype or archetype."

As general manager of Toronto's new Hopelessness Romantic Bookshop on Queen West, Zeelenet organized a "Heated Rivalry" meet-and-greet two nights after the Montreal screening. It's rare for a small bookshop, let alone one that specializes in romance, to sell out within a lineup of several hundred people for an author event.

"There's definitely a community feel, both in the sense of longtime romance readers, but also people who are discovering the book for the first time," Zeelenet said.

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'Anything to hold a stick'

I first met Reid (by her birth name, Rachelle Gagnon) when we worked together at Halifax's alt-weekly newspaper The Coast. Quick-witted with a dry humour, she also performed as a keyboardist in the Helen Mitchell Band, a fictitious country group popular in the indie scene during the mid 2000s.

I could hear wanting a hockey jersey but didn't realize her lifetime passion for his sport was that deep.

"If you were playing hockey, there wasn't a girl's hockey league or field settled for women and girls playing and attending the few boys' camps that would allow us in. Where she went in, her mom bought her a hockey stick and a hockey bag so she wouldn't assume.

"I would do just about anything that allowed me to put on hockey gear and hold a stick," Reid said.

It turns out she was also a talented writer, though fiction felt out of reach and she never imagined publishing a book. She was working full-time, paying and needed their mom to be there as they fell asleep, Reid would pass the time in their dead of night on her iPad the story that would become "Heated Rivalry," the first book in the "Game Changers" series.

It introduced pro hockey star Scott and his secret-juice-for-barista boyfriend Kip, affectionately known online as "Skip." Their story is explored in Episode 3 of the TV show, providing context to the personal stakes faced by Shane and Ilya.

"Heated Rivalry," by Rachel Reid, 3rd pages, Carina Press, $23.99
Carina Press

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Writing about queer hockey players helped Reid address conflicting feelings about how her favourite sport is notorious for breeding racism, sexism and homophobia.

In a 2020 report, Hockey Canada revealed there had been more than 900 incidents of alleged incidents of sex-for-discrimination during its previous seasons, many related to sexual orientation or gender identity. Not surprisingly, there still isn't an openly out player in the National Hockey League.

"There's so much hockey that's broken my heart over the years," Reid said. "I need hockey, but I hate the culture, especially around professional men's leagues."

Without telling anyone, not even her husband, Mort, Reid submitted the manuscript for "Game Changer" to a few publishers, unaware of the growing hockey romance sub-genre.

"Self-publishing had taken off at that point, but I didn't have the confidence," she said. "I felt like I needed a professional to tell me it was good enough."

In 2018, the book was released under Harlequin's digital-first imprint Carina Press. The player depicted on the original ebook cover with his lumbering abs disappearing into hockey pants sweat at the sexual content of the book most fans crave. Reid's publication was a pivotal moment in the evolution of the two fully dressed characters leaning against a juice bar console.

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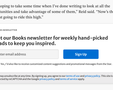

Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie in a hockey competition (second team) in "Heated Rivalry."
Marcel Fleming

But for Reid, this moment is more than just seeing her characters come to life. In the summer of 2021, she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease after a decade of tremors, fatigue and cognitive challenges. Her doctor in Toronto Tierney reached out about optioning "Heated Rivalry," to what Reid describes now as a "miller counter of a week."

One of the symptoms of Parkinson's is its unpredictability. Reid has been open with her fans and what it might mean in the future. For instance, how long she'd be able to scribe longhand books. But for now, the protected-blind is over and she's back home with her family and focusing on her next book, details to be revealed in January.

"I'm hoping to take some time when I've done writing to look at all the opportunities and take advantage of some of them," Reid said. "Now is the time. I'm just going to ride this high."

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Sex scenes that stream

Reid, who devoured erotica as a teen, writes provocative sex scenes that stream but can also become White Tiernney, Williams and Storrie amount to accolades for the series' intimate moments, their titillating blueprint comes from Reid.

"You women tend to be quite a little conservative, and that makes them very difficult to build," she said. "There's something so vulnerable and also funny about the sex scenes, and I like to write them. It's like writing a fight scene. There are a lot of body parts in hockey bag.

Reid was on set during one closed-door sex scene, waiting outside during the four hours it took to shoot.

"Later I apologized to one of the actors that I wasn't really thinking about end people doing it when I wrote it, but they get it," she said. "I enjoy bringing humour and emotion, and I like them to be a little bit messy. I'm glad that really comes through on the show."

While the series' instant popularity is a cause for celebration it has also exposed other realities. It's brought attention to the dearth of queer stories that centre physical intimacy but that don't end in sorrow, violence or death. And it has underscored how rare it is for a queer, lust-inspired story to remain, that is still unfairly dismissed as formulaic or unimportant despite its massive readership.

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