

‘Heated Rivalry’ Renewed My Faith in Sex With Men

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After years of unsatisfying relationships, the writer had reason to believe that sex with men could never be equitable. But the hot, sexy new HBO series about a secret romance between two male hockey rivals has given her hope.

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I’ve been reluctantly celibate for almost ten years. Yes, *ten years*. That is not a typo. Before that, whether I was hooking up or in committed relationships, I fake-moaned my way through a mostly unsatisfying sex life. Eventually, I shifted my energy toward my careers, hobbies, and loved ones, and away from bad sex. I never declared it as a feminist action, but that’s exactly what it was: I simply forfeited sex — and the pursuit of sex — because, as a straight woman, I’d rather have no sex than wade through more years of bad sex. I chose to wait for lightning to strike in the form of a decent, sexually capable man. At least this is what I thought I was waiting for before watching the hot, horny, humbly produced Canadian streamer *Heated Rivalry*, available in the U.S. on HBO.

Heated Rivalry is based on author Rachel Reid’s best-selling romance novel about two rival professional hockey players, the Russian Ilya Rosanov (Connor Storrie) and Canadian Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), who are carrying on a clandestine sexual affair over a decade, and find themselves falling in love. *Vulture* reported that *Heated Rivalry* surpassed 324 million streaming minutes by December 26 (though some sources have reported 600 million minutes of viewing in the week of January 12), with women comprising most of its diverse viewership. It’s not a tough sell for straight women to watch two men made of God’s finest marble embrace in soft mood lighting that highlights flexed triceps and defined butt cheeks. But even the most chiseled abs can’t explain the mounting fandom that is materializing in bar viewings, tattoos, and merch. Stuck in my own elder millennial ways, I rarely watch anything current and I am immune to the binge-watching model, but I’ve viewed the entire *Heated Rivalry* series six times (and counting). *Heated Rivalry* is a cinematic guide for those of us hoping to experience carnal, equitable love and desire.

From my late teens through my 30s, most of my sexual encounters could be described as measured. Whether the sex was good or bad, casual hookups or sex within a committed relationship, I could always hear the sound of a No. 2 pencil checking things off a list in my male partner’s head. If we kissed before hooking up, he drew a tally mark for each peck as if to meet a minimal kissing requirement that, once reached, would allow him to get on with vaginal jackhammering he’d been waiting for. Kissing afterwards? Always a bonus based on his calculations for how much he enjoyed his orgasm and how paranoid he was that I might think our sex meant something more.

Heated Rivalry’s much-discussed sex scenes are raw and passionate, and I was shocked to realize I’d dismissed the fact that sex could (should) be hot, steamy, and reciprocal. Rozanov and Hollander’s first hookup begins with generous kissing and clear, sexy, sincere inquisition about what Hollander would like to do. Each frame could be dissected to show a version of sex that exists between these two that simply wouldn’t for a typical heterosexual, male-dominated sexual encounter, but nothing crystallized it more than the moments after Hollander first makes Rozanov orgasm. Rozanov does a quick wipe, exhales, and pretends to prepare to leave. If this episode were modeled after my own sex life, the credits would have rolled in that instant. Hollander is incredulous, until Rozanov rolls back over and says, “Oh, I would not leave you like that.”

Most of my sexual encounters did leave me hanging like that. While my partner was either poking his gnarly feet into his jeans to leave or yawning before drifting off into his deep orgasmed REM sleep, any concern about my orgasm was in the post-mortem: “You came, right?”

Rozanov and Hollander’s fictional pairing gives us a titillating case for what sex and intimacy can look like when two people believe the other to be equal.

Plenty of women have partnered with men who insist that both parties orgasm, but they’re probably a lucky statistical minority given that men are socialized to prioritize their own orgasms, rooted in a fundamental sexist belief that men are superior to women. I’m not naïve enough to believe that all same-sex couples circumvent this reality by eliminating gender difference as a variable since the patriarchy forces its tentacles into every pairing. But Rozanov and Hollander’s fictional pairing gives us a titillating case for what sex and intimacy — from “Hollander and Rozanov” to “Shane and Ilya,” casual hookup to committed partnership — can look like when two people believe the other to be equal. I’m most reminded of this in an unexpected portrayal of their equality: the gut-wrenching last scene of Episode 2, when Hollander types “we didn’t even kiss” in a text message before deleting it. He didn’t say “you didn’t kiss me” or “I kissed you, but you didn’t kiss me back.” Even when intimacy gets messy in their fictional bond, its origins are rooted in equality.

As the series progressed, I stirred in my seat and, inexplicably, my heart. I couldn’t believe how much *Heated Rivalry* activated a palpable, undeniable yearning within me. I yearned for this fictional world unburdened by gender expectations that inundated all of my love lives. Scott Henderson didn’t expect Kip to keep house while he was away at work the way my unemployed partner expected me to do after I came home from work. I shudder every time I think about all the pandemic wives who balanced work, remote school, laundry, and dinner while the husbands did Crossfit workouts in their garage gyms. The division of labor didn’t impact *Heated Rivalry* relationships, nor did body politics. Yes, it’s probably easier to achieve body neutrality when both parties have bodies that contain 0.2 percent body fat. But there’s no way to think about the equality of these relationships without noting the psychic relief of watching each couple enjoy one another’s bodies without effusive ogling or complaining. I bite my own lip all over again just thinking of what this must feel like.

Each subsequent viewing summoned a yearning that rendered me high and sober all at once. I was inebriated with the mutual respect within both couples, which is rooted in their socially equitable partnerships. Their airtight bonds aren’t penetrated by lethargic conversations about being the breadwinner, whose turn it is to make the pasta salad (chicken, no feta), the presumed prioritization of the dominant male’s pleasure, or of the other common burdens of heterosexual partnership that most frequently plague women.

I was probably on my third viewing before my yearning faded into discouragement. That’s when my own reality sank in, that the odds of partnering with a man who believes that I am his equal — as illustrated by Shane and Ilya or, perhaps more accurately, Scott and Kip — are slim to none.

I could feel myself collapsing under the weight of this reality. The *Heated Rivalry* universe felt so real it seemed like I ought to touch it. Instead, what I can actually touch is my own past relationships and situationships. Where my base pay was eye-contactless missionary and my bonus was metered kissing, reluctant oral sex, and maybe dinner on one tab instead of a defiant 50/50 split. Conversations with past partners weren’t filled with earnest, sexy banter, and clear supplications for consent. (Though my sex life wasn’t great, it was gratefully consensual.) Conversations were drenched in insecurity that he made less than I did. That he perceived his penis to be literally and figuratively smaller than the guys in class or at work. That, somehow, me not keeping house was a threat to his manhood. That me wanting a partner in a relationship, not a male leader in a relationship was a threat to the “natural order” of our union. Or, one of the most ridiculous quips from my first situationship, that “eating pussy is for pussies.” That’s the universe I can touch. By the time we see Shane placing a blanket over Ilya’s cold shoulders overlooking the cottage lake or Ilya accompanying Shane to reveal their relationship to his parents, their union is the best example of being equally yoked, a phrase that would never describe my own past.

As sobering as my reality is, the allure of an equal partnership kept bringing me back to the *Heated Rivalry* universe. My sexual experiences as a straight woman have not been great, but what I want — steamy equal partnership — can’t be that hard. If it can be imagined in a Canadian gay hockey romantic-sex series, surely some semblance of it can be attained. Some days I catch myself thinking that if I keep watching it, something will click. Is this how manifesting works? Am I *calling in* my sexy equitable man from the universe from the comfort of my couch, Apple TV remote in hand?

Some fans have started talking about “*Heated Rivalry* derangement syndrome,” the way our brains are forgetting the hobbies, activities, and identities we all had before *Heated Rivalry*. Mine is showing up in a way that I don’t ever want to ever go away, to quote our Russian fave from the cottage couch, just before Shane and Ilya’s toes touched. Perhaps my brain is like the MTA replacing signals at 23rd Street while old wiring and subsequent delays persist at West 4th Street. Each episode replaced an old belief, assumption, or expectation of how equitable sex and intimacy work, one station at a time. My entire system hasn’t updated and my new signals haven’t been tested, but I’m getting there.

Most importantly, instead of giving in to the oft-understood realities of 21st century dating, I’ve let *Heated Rivalry* propel me to try. I am trying to live again, from making friends at *Heated Rivalry* viewing parties to actually engaging with men in real life and on the cursed dating apps. I don’t have the Shane to my Ilya or the Scott to my Kip, but I’ve got something just as good: a will to try again.

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