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GUEST ESSAY

A Sweet, Sexy, Happy Love Story Between Two Men. Revolutionary.

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This article contains spoilers for the Crave/HBO Max series "Heated Rivalry."

"Heated Rivalry" has become a breakout hit. The hockey drama — adapted from an erotic romance novel for the Canadian streaming service Crave — just ended its first season on HBO Max and has left gay men crying at watch parties that feel more like 19th-century religious revivals.

If you want to understand why this show has become our community's equivalent of a cultural earthquake, the answer is that watching a gay couple be mildly boring and in love is still radical.

During the season, two rival Major League Hockey stars — Shane Hollander of the fictional Montreal Metros and Ilya Rozanov of the Boston Raiders — fall for each other, moving from adversaries to soul mates. There are plenty of steamy locker room encounters and charged rendezvous in luxury penthouses. But in the season finale, which landed last week, the two men are secluded in an intimate cottage — grilling burgers, lying by firelight, taking daytime swims, scrolling through their phones on the sofa.

Culture has not kept up with queer people, despite major political strides, legal victories (including marriage equality) and growing social acceptance. Stories and art explicitly about queer life are being made, but they rarely find a wide gay audience. They're not typically embraced the way "Heated Rivalry" has been.

It is not for lack of trying. The work exists; the resonance doesn't. We have queer novels, indie films, performance art and poetry. Occasionally there's a bigger film like "Bros," which came out in 2022. I loved that film; that Billy Eichner persuaded Hollywood to make a rom-com about us was no small feat. Early in the film, his character responds to someone who asserts that "gay and straight relationships are the same — love is love is love." He snaps: "Love is love is love? No, it's not!" It's a clarifying moment. The slogan that helped win us marriage equality also sanded down the edges of queer intimacy until it looked safe to straight eyes.

For years, queer representation in mainstream culture was driven by a political imperative. We needed to be palatable, monogamous and mortgage-ready to be tolerated. You could see this impulse in "Will & Grace," where queerness was domesticated through friendship and slapstick, and later in "Modern Family," where the suburban gay couple were beloved precisely because they reassured straight viewers that nothing about them was too strange, too erotic or too much. A lot of what is being produced about gay men, even now, replicates a straight world in rainbow colors.

Maybe what we ache for now is not culture built to serve a political end but a focus on the intimate — someone on top of us, breaking down in tears as he confesses his love. What is turning us on is not the thrill of naked bodies but the shock of being emotionally known. That is what some of us have been missing.

"Heated Rivalry" often focuses on the flirtations queer people recognize instantly: the charged eye contact at the opening face-off, boyfriends nudging feet under the table during a coming out, a glance across a crowded gala. The literary critic Richard Kaye has argued that flirtation has long been central to Western literature, a serious erotic mode in novels from Jane Austen to E.M. Forster. Seeing that tradition evolve onscreen between two men — not as subtext but as text — feels like a revolution.

What feels especially new is the way that flirtation becomes true intimacy. When another player in the league comes out by kissing his partner on the ice — a game changer in every sense — Shane's phone rings. Ilya tells him he's coming to Shane's secluded lakeside cottage. Not for a night. Not for a postgame hookup. He's choosing to step into Shane's life, transforming their yearslong relationship into something with a future.

In the early 20th century, gay men gathered in a cottage in rural Maine to share stories about Walt Whitman, tracing desire across generations. The artist Marsden Hartley learned from men who had known Whitman and Peter Doyle, a former Confederate soldier who became Whitman's partner, inheriting their memories like a family tree without blood. The impulse, to find ourselves in the historical record, carried into the

1970s, when writers in the gay magazine The Body Politic documented Hartley's world to teach gay readers that our history was a ledger of longing.

For so long, we looked for stories that proved we were real. The archive shows that we existed; it doesn't always show how we loved.

"Heated Rivalry" resonates because it embodies our lives. After the religious right pathologized us during the H.I.V./AIDS crisis, we reclaimed the sex story by reviving bathhouses and sex parties, by unapologetically embracing hookup culture on apps like Grindr, by celebrating eroticism in our fashion and nightlife. And slowly, we became more visible in family life and at work. There are queer politicians and lawyers, Olympians and celebrities. But representation is not the same thing as intimacy. We still need more stories about us, our relationships, our romances, our desires.

As the show has gained popularity, the cultural conversation has veered, perhaps predictably, toward straight people's responses to the show. Articles, TikToks and morning shows have fixated on the thrill of being, say, a straight woman witnessing two men falling in love. This commentary has felt uncomfortably reminiscent of bachelorette parties in gay bars — our spaces becoming someone else's spectacle, our bodies becoming someone else's backdrop.

But if straight women like the show, that is fine. They should enjoy it. After all, it was adapted from a novel written by a woman. Her stated goal — to make a sweet, sexy, happy love story between two men in which, as she says, "the sexual tension and romance isn't subtext or a tease or something that ends in tragedy" — fits what so many of us have been missing. Her willingness to write toward our joy feels rare, and so does the result: our intimacy made central, not symbolic; love scenes that are not lessons; desire that doesn't apologize for itself.

We do not need more stories to prove that we exist. We need stories that capture how we live — in the touch, the embrace, the everyday if boring intimacies that were never meant to be translated. Our next frontier is not mere acceptance but depth.

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