'There's going to be a bandwagon': After Heated Rivalry, women are driving a gay erotic boom on screen

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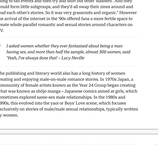
Scott Lewis/Crave/Bell Media

The man-on-man hockey romance has been a cultural phenomenon among straight female viewers – and will likely lead to more same-sex love stories in film and TV.

"Eya Rozanov?" One young man, hoofed up in a winter coat and hat asks another man, who is smoking a cigarette outside a sports stadium. "Shane Hollander. I wanted to introduce myself." With this brief but loaded exchange, we begin the screen romance that has dominated the pop culture conversation in recent weeks – between the two leads of erotic drama Heated Rivalry.

Adapted from Canadian author Rachel Reid's Game Changers novel series, the story follows the romance between Russian hockey player Rozanov (Connor Storrie) and Hollander (Hudson Williams), who play for rival teams. But these would-be enemies quickly (incredibly so, within the show's first 17 minutes) become lovers, and their secretive, on-and-off relationship is depicted explicitly across six episodes covering a decade, from 2008 to 2018.



Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Eya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) in a part of the passage "hockey romance" fiction will gather inevitably inside for hockey fans, Hollander's and Rozanov's

What should have been a niche, small-time show – created for Crave, a small Canadian streaming service – has exploded across global broadcasters. HBO Max picked up the series a week before its Canadian launch on 28 November, and began broadcasting it on the same date in the US and Britain, it has been met with a rapturous response from critics and audiences alike. After just two episodes, Harper's Bazaar listed it among its **best LGBTQ+ television series of all time**.

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That it had a positive response from this fanbase might well have been predicted, but what has been more surprising to some is the show's other core demographic: women, and specifically straight women. Even **Cosmopolitan** to **NPR** many media outlets have been asking why the show's female fans are so drawn to a story of two male professional hockey-player-to-colleague. Rarely though, this shouldn't be a surprise at all – given the long history of women engaging with this kind of material, on the page if not on screen.

The history of the phenomenon

Since the 1960s, certainly, it is well-documented that male-on-male romance and erotica stories have provided fuel for a female audience. One notable case of this was when female fans of the then-new Star Trek series (1966-69) created a fanzine featuring the romance of Captain Kirk and Spock. They wrote their own, intricate stories where these two characters were lovers, creating what has also become known as 'slash' fiction, a particular type of fan fiction pairing up same-sex characters.

In a pre-internet world, it's difficult to know how this very specific group of female fans with an unusual fantasy might have connected, but they found a way, explains Lucy Neville, author of 2018's Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys: Women and Gay Male Pornography and Erotica. "I interviewed a lot of women who were into fanfic back in the '60s," she says. "And it was all about photocopied zines. They would take them to conventions, and they would sell them in brown paper bags, because they would have to oblige vamp – Japanese comics aimed at girls, which sometimes explored same-sex male relationships. In the 1980s and 1990s, this evolved into the just as Boys' Love scene, which focuses exclusively on stories of male/male sexual relationships, typically written by women.

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Shane Hollander (left) and Jack Ross (Steve Lai) in a fan-drawing, with a sequel to the series Heated Rivalry

In the US and UK, the Black Lace imprint – a racier alternative to the popular romances of Mills & Boon – launched in 1993, with a focus on female-friendly erotica. Its titles included a lot of contemporary same-sex stories, which were all written by women. Meanwhile, in the present day, publishing imprints like Harlequin's Carina Adores, Dreamspinner and Riptide **feed into a thriving industry** of male-on-male or M/M romance, consumed by women.

As especially popular and niche variation has been the 'hockey romance', with Reid's Game Changers one of several book series in which male ice hockey players get it on, others include Eden Finley's CO Hockey and Amy Aiden's Stick Side books. The sports world makes a good milieu for these romance stories – these men – in peak physical form, form a "battle" rival teams, driving the drama, while often proving to be tough guys with a heart of gold.

What is the female appeal?

The appeal of these same-sex erotic stories is in part be hailed down to fantasy, as New Statesman writer Anna Christine Hughes noted **in her article** about Heated Rivalry: "Sometimes the visible reality is as straightforward as: what better than one hot man? Two." Another theory put forward among the reams of discourse around the show's erotic appeal to women is the potential it offers to enjoy **depictions of sex untainted by misogyny or gender imbalances**.

But in focus groups for her book, Neville found that for many women, the appeal of gay male erotica was something more primal. "I asked a question to the group about whether they ever fantasised about being a man," she recalls. "And I thought I'd get a lot of yes, but I actually got 200 women, said 'Yeah, I've always done that'. And for some of them, it was related to a kind of trans-ness [they felt]. But for the vast majority, it was entirely separate from how they perceive their gender identity. It was just purely something when they were fantasising."

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> *Recently, gay male romance and eroticism have been prominently depicted in a variety of shows*

As explored by academics like Mercy Jenkins – an expert on fan fiction and author of seminal fan-culture study Textual Poachers – and gender studies scholar Judith Butler, it could also be down to the fact that from the age women learn to read, they are mostly exposed to stories where they're asked to identify as a male character. Prun Peter Pan to Holden Caulfield in The Catcher In The Rye, girls grow up imagining what it's like to be a man, and this could be a key factor in female fans' appreciation of "Judith Butler says 'Well, that could then become part of your sexual identity too,'" adds Neville. "And I think I really saw that for a lot of these women, it was very easy for them to imagine being a man having sex. It didn't feel odd to them."

While the market for male-on-male romance has grown exponentially in the publishing world, Hollywood has been slower on the uptake. Back in 2000, Brokeback Mountain – featuring Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger as cowboys discovering their "forbidden" love for each other – looked like it might pave the way for many more same-sex male romances on screen. But as writer Tim Teeman noted in a **BBC Sounds on the 20th anniversary of the film** last year, there's since been "little consistency and regularity in the flow of queer-themed stories and lead characters to the screen".

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Recently, gay male romance and eroticism have been prominently depicted in shows from Benito Skinner's Overcompensating (also on Crave) to Netflix's Heartstopper. The latter, which depicts romance set in feature sexual activity between two of the male leads in coming weeks, while **The Night Manager** season two flirts with the idea of a homoerotic energy between its hero Jonathan Pine (Tom Hiddleston) and villain Teddy Dez Santos (Diego Calva).

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Is there any potential tension created by gay male sexuality becoming fetishised by straight female viewers, **as happened in a recent Salon article** by Jessica Stockton Bizzell? Neville says: "I've interviewed more than 200 queer men about this, and the overwhelming response from them was that they really, really could not care less, if [the representation] was vaguely positive. They were like, 'If there's some gay male gaze, gay content, then great'."

"Some of the gay men I spoke with said things like: 'I grew up thinking people who aren't gay are going to be probably neutral at best or at worst homophobic towards me – like thinking about you and your boyfriend together makes me feel sick. It's disgusting. So actually knowing that women are thinking about you and your boyfriend together is fun, I love it'."

One thing seems sure: Heated Rivalry's imprint on culture is going to be a long-lasting one. With Storrie and Williams doing the red-carpet rounds and becoming the stars do just, the series has already been commissioned for series two. And it's been **suggested by Storrie that it could shoot this** next season in Toronto, where Game Changers will be found on Reid's follow-up book about the couple, The Long Game.

As for the wider mass-on-mass romance genre, "I think you're going to see more of on screen," says Neville, "definitely after the success of Heated Rivalry. I can see there's going to be a lot of trying to jump on the bandwagon, but I think that's a good thing." And, if they are going to capitalise on the phenomenon, studios and production houses aren't going to struggle for content or inspiration: "They've got a wealth of source material," adds Neville. "With decades and decades of fan fiction, they're not going to run out of it any time soon."

Heated Rivalry is streaming now on HBO Max in the US and Sky and Now in the UK.

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article referred to Casey McQuiston as a female author. Their gender identity and pronouns have been corrected.

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