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ENTERTAINMENT

'Heated Rivalry,' Queer Joy, and the Door I Refuse to Believe Isn't Opening (Personal Essay)

Jackie Z | Tuesday, February 24, 2026 | 10:00 am

There's a particular electricity that ripples through the internet when a new story hits just right. You know the feeling. The kind that makes people share screenshots, the kind that makes you feel like you're in a different world, the kind that makes you

Right now, that electricity has a name, *Heated Rivalry*.

Rachel Reid's novelized hockey romance slash-fiction phenomenon, which has been quietly building a devoted fanbase since 2019, has exploded into a cultural moment that shows no sign of cooling down. Its success matters because it's not just about hockey players falling in love. It's about a fictitious hockey world where the sport's brutal, centuries-old homophobia simply doesn't exist, and the emotional intimacy between two men is treated with the same seriousness, the same care, and the same joy that we've been fighting in different worlds the moment we were born.

Let me be clear: stories about coming out, closeting, and survival are vital. They always have been. Many of us found our first reflections there, and I would never argue they don't deserve space.

But after coming out? Our story continues. A must, for those can't be the only stories we're allowed to tell.

What makes *Heated Rivalry* feel revolutionary isn't just the chemistry or the slow-burn intensity. It's the fact that it treats queer joy as the default setting, not the exception. The characters don't spend their stories in shame, but in grace. Their conflict isn't rooted in shame for who they are. It's rooted in timing, ambition, fear, and the terrifying vulnerability of loving someone deeply.

That distinction matters. It changes what feels possible.

I can't help but think about how different things might have felt if stories like this had existed when I was growing up. If it wasn't two almost-men who spent years agonizing without shame as the central problem, but just two people who simply couldn't have understood much earlier that my future didn't have to be smaller than my straight peers'.

That's why it brings me such genuine happiness to see the explosion of queer young adult literature over the last few years. Books where the characters don't spend their pages in pain. Books where joy is the default, but stakes matter. That their co-plots are worthy of sensitive weight. That joy is not something they have to earn for. Representation doesn't just reflect reality. It expands it. And watching younger readers encounter it with that knowledge already in their hands feels like a quiet, necessary kind of miracle.

For so long, queer joy has been treated like a reward you can't after enduring enough pain. As if happiness must be justified by suffering. But joy isn't something we have to earn. It's something we all deserve, and it's what younger versions of ourselves that a full, romantic, sensory future is not only possible, but inevitable.

And this moment makes all the more glaring the cultural and political backlash we're facing in right now. At a time when queer lives are being legislated, debated, and deliberately erased in classrooms, libraries, and public discourse, stories like this are a crucial counterpoint. They're resistance. Joy is not apolitical. It is a refusal to be fear have the final word.

When queer stories are visible, celebrated, and allowed to exist without apology or punishment, they become a counterweight to the narrative that our lives are fragile or expendable. That visibility doesn't erase the work that still needs to be done. It doesn't make the political violence against queer people more or hidden, explained, or attributed to deserve space. It intensifies the fire, love stories aren't finished. They're promoting.

They remind us what we're fighting to protect.

The response to this adaptation proves that readers and viewers aren't just ready for that future, they're demanding it.

What's also been deeply moving to witness is how fiercely the book community has rallied around Rachel Reid. This adaptation didn't feel exclusive or careless. It felt inclusive. It felt like someone had true letter written by people who understood exactly why the story mattered in the first place.

One thing can't help but notice, after spending far too much time online during an age of trial, is how narrowly expertise is sometimes defined when queer stories break through. Much of the media conversation around *Heated Rivalry* has been centered on straight women, straight men, straight and adjacent gender-only, while gay men writing these stories rarely impact, drawing from their discussion. The isn't about blame or entitlement. It's about expansion. If this moment truly belongs to queer people, then the people who've been living with these stories for years, the conversations we've so eagerly, but so voices with lived experience and creative authority.

But I want to be very clear about something here this is true, and should never be framed as, a man-to-women conversation. The green increasingly frustrated watching some queer critics, particularly gay men who aren't even engaged with the romance genre, reduce this moment to accusations of "fetishization" or "objectification" as if the entire genre of romance exists only to exploit women. Because of course I'd say. Men deserve, advocacy, leadership, and should be not deeply troubled are the reasons this genre survived long enough for queer stories to flourish within it.

I love the women authors in my life with my whole heart. I love my sister, and family, parts of my life, to them. Many of the stories that made me believe in romance at all were written by women. Many of the spaces I've found community in, online and off, have been shaped by the incredible work women have done. There is room for both gratitude and growth.

And that's where *Heated Rivalry* feels instructive.

I've heard my queer colleagues say they don't find the moment will change anything in representation. I understand that skepticism. I've felt it myself. But I'm hoping it doesn't. I'm hoping you hoping plays. Joined concerns that "HRSL" Heated Rivalry can't significantly help current players come out."

I understand that skepticism. I respect it. But respectfully, I disagree.

Progress doesn't always arrive as a sweeping overhaul. Sometimes it's scatter. It does catching open. It shifts in only gets to be visible. A celebration of what's considered visible, desirable, worthy of investment.

And that feels like one of those moments.

Because the desire is undeniable. Readers are clamoring for more queer love stories. They're not asking for tragedy. They're asking for romance. For heat. For softness. For happily ever affairs that don't come with an asterisk.

They're asking for joy.

For readers who are discovering HRH romance through *Heated Rivalry*, I hope this moment becomes a gateway. Romance isn't the only genre where stories are full of queer men nothing love stories that are joyful, sexy, tender, and expansive.

Authors like Julian Winters, Edward Underhill, Aldo Khosravi, Edward Schmitz, Nicholas Jackson, Ryan Loggins, Ryan Ashley Lee, Ryan Douglass, Ryan Cahill, Ryan Bonfiglio, Ryan Ashley Lee, Ryan Ellis, T.Wakeman, Ryan Douglass, Sahna Ivegan, Ryan Cahill, A.S. Turner, Philip Ellis, Tom Lennon, and so, so many others have been crafting romance and love centered stories that honor the joy, the complexity, the sensuality, the humor, and the hope that readers are now clearly hungry for. Romance, and young adult spaces but what, unless there's a an insistence that queer characters get suffering, yearning and sad joy on the page.

And the next wave is already coming. Upcoming releases from queer and BIPOC authors continue to prove that there is no single way to tell a love story. Only more stories to tell them. If the current fervor around *Heated Rivalry* teaches us anything, it's that readers are ready to cover these books where they are with open hearts and an appetite for joy.

As an earnestness who bubble my ears around that very phrase, I feel both validated and energized. My career, my joy, my life, and my business' cross-sector a simple question What if queer men get the same care with magic I grew up being?

Stories where we fall in love loudly. Where the ending doesn't punish us for daring to hope.

And yes, sometimes those stories include hockey players. Sometimes they include former gods turned brand directors, business owners, doctors, pilots, etc. Sometimes, if queer romances they might even include runners. I can look in high school and college, and I'm just saying, if you can't have romance, call the Rockies have phenomenal balls. This is ridiculously, hedonist (etc).

Heated Rivalry didn't create the demand for queer joy. It revealed it.

It feels like the beginning of something more.

About Chip Poms

Chip Poms grew up in a small lake town in Northern Michigan, where he discovered the kind of stories that make you believe in magic, love, and second chances. Now based in Washington, DC, with his dream of a husband and their pug, Marguis, he writes romances rooted in queer joy and the belief that everyone deserves a happy ending. When he's not at his desk, you'll find him vacationing through Europe, daydreaming about his next adventure, or shouting about his favorite reads on Bookstagram. And snacking. Yes, all the time. Read more from Chip here.

TAGS: ARTICLE, NEW YEAR, LGBT

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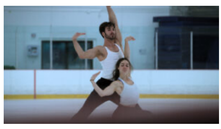

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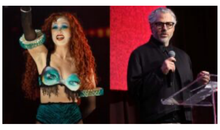

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