

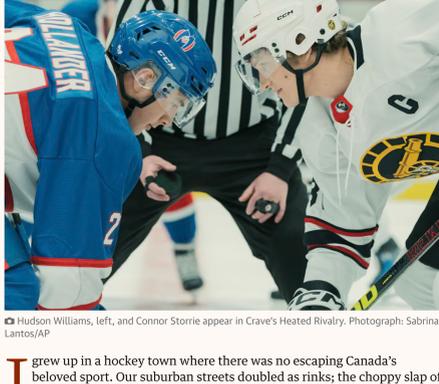
Opinion Canada

Ice hockey and then some: Heated Rivalry is a worldwide hit - and no one is happier about it than us Canadians

Sue Carter



In a country plagued by underdog status and a sport fraught with a history of racism, misogyny and homophobia, this adaptation has reimagined what's possible



Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie appear in Crave's Heated Rivalry. Photograph: Sabrina Lantos/AP

I grew up in a hockey town where there was no escaping Canada's beloved sport. Our suburban streets doubled as rinks; the choppy slap of tennis balls reverberating against hockey sticks a constant sound. As pre-teens, my friends and I would put on lip gloss and tight jeans to hang out at the Friday night junior hockey games. I still find comfort in the sound of skate blades slicing across ice and that sweaty, chemical odour of public arenas.

My experiences are not unique in a country with a 95-year-old broadcast institution called Hockey Night in Canada. Rachel Reid, the Nova Scotian author of the queer hockey romance Heated Rivalry, grew up a hockey fanatic, more interested in playing the game than ogling boys. Jacob Tierney, who wrote and directed the TV adaptation of Reid's 2019 bestseller, was raised in Montreal, where the Canadiens (or the Habs, as the team is affectionately known) are a sport sacred.

This is not to romanticise a country fraught with a history of racism, misogyny and homophobia. In July last year, six months before Heated Rivalry aired and became a cultural juggernaut, five junior hockey players were acquitted of sexual assault. And there still isn't an openly gay player in the National Hockey League (NHL). The NHL released an innocuous statement acknowledging the show's popularity but not the issues it addresses: "There are so many ways to get hooked on hockey and, in the NHL's 108-year history, this might be the most unique driver for creating new fans. See you all at the rink."

Reid and Tierney combined their adoration of our national sport and reimagined its possibilities for those of us who can't get past its toxic culture. Heated Rivalry may be a tender romance with plenty of butt shots, but it is also an outsider tale that resonates with how many Canadians view themselves in the world. We are often at our best when we tell stories from the periphery. Schitt's Creek is a classic outsider comedy, as is the delightful Inuit-led North of North.

Politically, the series couldn't be more perfectly timed. Last year, "Elbows Up!" became a rallying cry adopted by Canadian prime minister Mark Carney to express national solidarity in the wake of US president Donald Trump's tariffs war and threats to annex Canada as the 51st state. The slogan comes from hockey legend Gordie Howe and his signature move, using his mighty elbows both as protection and as a weapon against his opponents.

I would argue that Tierney, in shielding the books' eroticism and heart, kept his elbows up while making Heated Rivalry. In interviews, he's spoken about pitching the series to studios who wanted to make major changes, such as playing down the sex or shifting the perspective away from the main characters, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, played by Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie. The show maintains its Canadianisms: Ilya serving Shane his favourite ginger ale feels particularly Canuck, as does the iconic trip to the cottage.



Left, Shane Hollander, played by Hudson Williams, and Ilya Rozanov, played by Connor Storrie, in Heated Rivalry. Photograph: Sphere Abacus/PA

Beyond all the Hollywood shoutouts and photo-ops with Williams and Storrie, I have observed swelling pride that Heated Rivalry is an all-Canadian production. Americans who refer to it as an HBO Max show on social media are quickly corrected that it was produced by Crave, a Canadian-based streaming service. It's also very Canadian to see people posting how happy they are that their tax dollars are going toward the show through the public Canadian Media Fund and other granting agencies.

Tourism agencies are also having a ball. For once, they get to promote their own cities and towns as they exist, and not as transformed locations for American productions. Ottawa Tourism changed its social media bio to the "birthplace of Shane Hollander," and Hamilton, Ontario, where some of the series was shot, has been marketing the locations. It's refreshing to see conservative cities promote themselves through queer stories.

At the Golden Globes on 11 January, Storrie and Williams gave a cheeky shoutout onstage to the mums and daughters who watch the show. A week before it aired, I attended a fan event at a local romance bookstore in Toronto. Among the hundreds of people lined up to meet Reid, Storrie and Williams were those moms and daughters and other fans of the books. Reid was already a star to them even though, like most romance authors, she works outside of the traditional literary establishment. Even her publisher Harlequin was caught off guard by the depth of the fandom and had to scramble to keep up with demand. Weeks before the premiere, I visited four bookstores before I found a single copy.

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This is also a destructive Canadian trait: as self-declared underdogs, we often do not trust or invest in our own artists until there's commercial success stateside. Indigo, Canada's only national book chain, just announced that sales for Heated Rivalry are up 5,805% since the show aired. A day after announcing Reid's next book in the series, Unrivaled, it became Indigo's biggest pre-order romance title to date. The chain also predicts it will have the year's highest book sales.

Heated Rivalry is a phenomenon like I have never witnessed in the two decades I've been covering arts and culture. This week I've seen Instagram ads for local Heated Rivalry queer dance parties, drag brunches, trivia nights, comedy and art-making events. But I hope we get those elbows up and embrace new stories, too. Right now there's an energetic social media campaign to bring Crave's upcoming series Slo Pitch, about a lesbian slow-pitch beer league, to American HBO Max.

Sue Carter is a Toronto-based freelance writer and arts worker. Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

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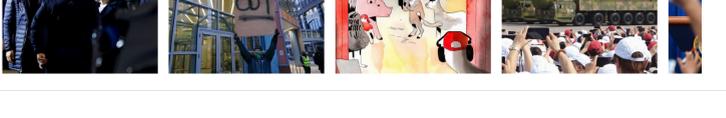
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