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Opinion

We'll believe in anything

by Brenna Wendell
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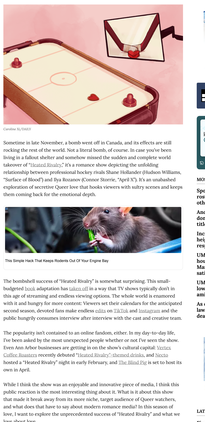
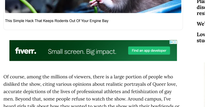


Courtesy TV/DVD

Sometime in late November, a bomb went off in Canada, and its effects are still rocking the rest of the world. Not a literal bomb, of course. In case you've been living in a fallout shelter and somehow missed the sudden and complete world takeover of "Heated Rivalry," it's a romance show depicting the unfolding relationship between professional hockey rivals Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams, "Surface of Blood") and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie, "April 8"). It's an unabashed exploration of secretive Queer love that hooks viewers with sultry scenes and keeps them coming back for the emotional depth.



This Simple Hack That Keeps Rodents Out Of Your Engine Bay

The bombshell success of "Heated Rivalry" is somewhat surprising. This small-budgeted book adaptation has taken off in a way that TV shows typically don't in this age of streaming and endless viewing options. The whole world is enamored with it and hungry for more content: Viewers set their calendars for the anticipated second season, devoted fans make endless edits on TikTok and Instagram and the public hungrily consumes interview after interview with the cast and creative team.

The popularity isn't contained to an online fandom, either. In my day-to-day life, I've been asked by the most unexpected people where I watch it and I'm not the only one. Even Ann Arbor businesses are getting in on the show's cultural capital: Vertex Coffee Roasters recently debuted "Heated Rivalry"-themed drinks, and Sacra hosted a "Heated Rivalry" night in early February, and The Blind Pig is set to host its own in April.

While I think the show was an enjoyable and innovative piece of media, I think this public reaction is the most interesting thing about it. What is it about this show that made it break away from its more niche, target audience of Queer watchers, and what does that have to say about modern romance media? In this season of love, I want to explore the unprecedented success of "Heated Rivalry" and what we love about love.

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Of course, among the millions of viewers, there is a large portion of people who disliked the show, citing various opinions about realistic portrayals of Queer love, accurate depictions of the lives of professional athletes and hybridization of gay men. Beyond that, some people refuse to watch the show. Around campus, I've heard girls talk about how they wanted to watch "Heated Rivalry" with their girlfriends or straight male friends, who in turn refused to interact with the show because of its sexual elements and their own feelings of discomfort and shame. It's so common for modern media to be sexually explicit, with or without necessity for plot progression, but it often doesn't face direct criticism as "Heated Rivalry." Are people getting more hesitant to engage with explicit content as society veers more conservative, or is it because the sexual content in question is between two men?

Steep Ashes? Try This Japanese Trick (It's Genius!)

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I honestly think that it's a matter of exposure. It isn't like "Heated Rivalry" is the first piece of television media to show an explicit Queer sexuality. Recent movies like "Love Lies Bleeding" and "Chaos" immediately come to mind. Gay movies have been explicit for decades. But the difference is the scope of audience. "Heated Rivalry" was likely targeting fans of the books and LGBTQ+ romance. But, in its widely-reaching success, "Heated Rivalry" is many people's first exposure to this type of media.

I do think that the story "Heated Rivalry" tells is refreshing in a variety of ways. Despite some negative opinions, the newfound cultural relevance and overwhelmingly positive public reception display that the world was ready to receive a show like this. I think the themes of "Heated Rivalry" can create a productive discussion about gender roles, Queer joy and courage that tie the whole thing together to create something that truly flourished in today's romance culture.

One comment I've heard time and time again is that "Heated Rivalry" is a show for straight women. But this generalization begs the question, "Is there a rule that says who is allowed to consume media?" Are we assuming that straight women only watch this show for its sensual elements, that this fanbase is built entirely on fetishization? You cannot deny the large community of straight women who have really connected with this show, but there must be something resonating with them. What do straight people see in this show, if the love being reflected is not directly relatable to them? What draws straight people to Queer media in the first place?

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When it comes to romance, I think that love is the connecting thread. Romance is the most accessible, relatable form of media. Though you may never experience the exact details of a specific story yourself, there are always pieces of it that can be relatable. The yearning and wistfulness, the struggle of being in an unfaithful relationship, the anticipation of seeing a long-distance lover — these are all things that people of any sexuality can relate to.

Queer romances often make for interesting commentary on gender roles. In "Heated Rivalry" Shane and Ilya are both traditionally masculine figures, to the extreme. The superstar professional hockey players, they are tough, dominant and physically strong. They carry themselves with careful airs of celebrity, the almost detached and unyielding nature we come to expect from male athletes. When they come together, however, in the darkness of shadowy hotel rooms, there isn't any magical switch flipped. They are both equally dominant and submissive in turn. They share themselves with no archetypically-determined power dynamic guiding their steps. They do not submit to each other because of power or expectation, but rather, because of love — because it's what feels right to them. Their walls come down together, allowing them to be vulnerable with each other as they fall more in love.

I've never been in a relationship with a man, but I've kissed a few. The first time I kissed a man, he kept trying to spin me around. I was the one to initiate it, but still, I was looking up at him and his big hands kept pushing me against the wall. He wanted to spin me, and so he did. I was the one who kept pushing the interaction, but he was still in charge. The second time I kissed a man, I was so impaired that I almost didn't remember it. It's something that he knew my mouth and I forgot his. I wonder if he knew how far gone I was, if he knew how much power he had in that moment. The third time, I didn't let a man kiss me, but he did anyway. There's always a moment when you realize how much power someone holds over you simply by virtue of being a man. When you are a girl with a man, they have the power. No matter how strong you are, no matter how dominant you are, no matter what you do say. Societal expectations and physical strength dictate that, as the woman in the relationship, you are always lesser. Every time that I have ever experienced a romantic connection with a man, I have felt less than, even in my waning. This feeling has made me avoid serious relationships with men for fear of losing some crucial sense of autonomy.

Queer media introduced me to the idea that I could be loved by a man in an equal way, in a way that does not take away from my personhood. I do not want to be fundamentally smaller, lesser or dominated in the way that it seems I always will be in relationships with men. I don't want to feel as if I'm always looking up to a man for his approval. I want him to meet me on even standing ground. This seems to be a common theme among the other bisexual women I know, who often tend to seek relationships with people who aren't men to avoid this uncomfortable power dynamic.

Of course, not all straight love is about dominance and power. You can find a love where you feel equal, happy and fulfilled, but the strong patterns of female passivity and male authority in the culture of straight love can feel hard to escape. I think that a lot of straight and bisexual women are drawn to Queer love stories because they display a relationship with men that is communicative and loving, rather than one that plays a part that society expects of them. "Heated Rivalry" helps us realize what we want from love by showing us a change in the archetypes of dominance we tend to see within society and our personal lives.

This show was quietly groundbreaking to me in another way. Over and over, new Queer media makes me cry. Tragedy is an excellent form of art, but there seems to be an overwhelming amount of tragedy in Queer romance. There are so many lighthearted romcoms with straight couples, so many shows with feel-good endings. We don't see that so much in Queer media. Movies like "Brokeback Mountain" "Call Me by Your Name" and "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" are masterpieces, but they are so, so objectively sad. What hope do we have when our favorite movies representing our stories end in devastation?

As a teenager attempting to figure out my sexuality in quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, the only thing I had to go off of was stories. It was a largely internal battle due to the isolation period. Like many others who identify as bisexual, I was convinced that my Queerness wasn't important enough, that I could always just find straight partners. Why would I want to associate myself with a group that faces struggles and discrimination if I could just ignore that part of myself forever? What finally brought me peace was consuming media that depicted LGBTQ+ characters making it through their struggles and living happy lives with their less conventional stories. Since then, coming out to people close to me has always felt like a weight off my chest. You feel lighter when you bring your truth into the light — and stories can give you the courage to realize this.

For those who grew up thinking that something was fundamentally wrong with them, for those who have convinced themselves that romance is not something they can find, for those who live their most joyful lives in the shadows: Stories are not just stories. They are a reminder that there are others like you out there facing the same battles and winning. They are a reminder that love exists for everybody. They are a reminder that you, too, can take a step toward the light.

What is a story if not a means of conveying a belief? The media that I consume changes my mind every day. I can believe in anything that is put before me. In the same way, this type of media changes society on a larger level, and the world reflects its beliefs in the things we make popular. In the wake of "Heated Rivalry"'s success, I think we believe in love.

Statement Columnist Brenna Wendell can be reached at bwendell@umich.edu.

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