

BOOKSELLING

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Heated Rivalry gives indie booksellers an unexpected midwinter sales boost



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Its name can be found in headlines featuring everyone from NHL commissioner Gary Bettman to Prime Minister Mark Carney; its lead actors in the tv series were recently featured as Olympic flag-bearers despite not being athletes; and copies of the book the show is based on are flying off the shelves – if they even make it there – at independent bookstores across the country, giving booksellers an unexpected sales boost at a typically quiet time of year.

Heated Rivalry, the queer hockey romance first published in 2019 by Harlequin imprint Carina Press, is the second of six books in Rachel Reid's *Game Changer* series. Its protagonists, Canadian Shane Hollander and Russian Ilya Rosanov, are professional hockey players with a longstanding on-ice rivalry who also share a secret, off-ice romance. The book was adapted into a limited television series of the same name that premiered on Canadian streaming service Crave in November 2025, and was subsequently picked up for streaming in the U.S. by HBO Max.

In the weeks since the show aired, the book has claimed a spot on all the bestseller lists, and demand for it is unusually widespread.

Michelle Hayles, sales director at Canadian book distributor North 49, had a one-word answer when asked who is looking to order copies of the book.

"Everyone," Hayles told *Q&Q* this week. "Booksellers all over the country. It's everywhere, it really is everywhere."

Demand for copies of the book surged in late 2025, and several indie booksellers told *Q&Q* there was a period of a few weeks, soon after the show first aired, that copies of the book were hard to track down. Despite this period of unavailability, however, demand has only grown, with the book and Reid's other titles skating to spots on bestseller lists across North America, including *Q&Q*'s.

At Ottawa's The Spaniel's Tale, it was early October when co-owner Cole Davidson noticed an unusual number of special orders start to come in for a mass-market paperback he hadn't heard of before. The book, with its typical romance cover featuring two shirtless men, was not the kind of title that Davidson would usually order.

"We don't as a rule carry mass markets in the store, but we were getting so many orders that I decided to break that rule and get some in. So we had this on the shelf and it continued to sell," Davidson says.

Once Davidson heard about the TV show, he ordered the 2024 edition of the book with its more contemporary illustrated cover. The trade paperback continued to sell, with December sales outpacing November sales, and January sales on track to outpace December sales.

"It just keeps going and it just keeps getting hotter and that's not something that we typically see outside of perhaps an award winner," Davidson says, estimating that the store has sold close to 300 copies of the series, more than sales of Louise Penny's *Black Wolf* and Margaret Atwood's *Book of Lives* combined.

Getting copies to meet the surge in demand has been an issue for The Spaniel's Tale, which has dozens of copies on order all the time from both HarperCollins and U.S.-based distributor Ingram.

"Every time we get a delivery [of copies of *Heated Rivalry*], they're all spoken for; none of them actually make it to the shelf."

The picture is similar at B.C. independent mini-chain Black Bond Books. President Cathy Jesson said special orders for the book were coming from all locations, even the ones that typically skewed more literary. As soon as the books come in, they go out to the customers who have ordered them, not stopping on the shelf along the way. The chain has sold hundreds of copies, an amount Jesson thinks could easily have been doubled if the stores ever had any copies on shelves.

"It's a nice little bump at this time of year," Jesson says. "It'll be nice to catch up and have big stacks in the stores – and then see where it goes from there."

This unexpected bump in sales didn't come as a surprise to all booksellers, however. At Toronto romance bookstore Hopeless Romantic, manager Shelly Zevlever, a longtime Rachel Reid fan, had been aware the Crave series was coming. The store hosted an event with Reid and actors Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams, who play the book's protagonists in the show, on Nov. 26, two days before the first episode was made available on Crave. The event was attended by about 300 people, and all of the nearly 300 copies of *Heated Rivalry* the store ordered were spoken for days in advance of the event.

Zevlever, who jokes that it is their life's work to make sure every person in Toronto reads a copy of the book, says that even now, more than a month after the show's first episode aired – and seven years after it was first published – Hopeless Romantic can't keep copies of the book in stock. "As soon as we get them, they sell out. It's a good problem to have."

So far, Zevlever estimates the downtown store has sold more than 500 copies of the book; pre-orders for *Unrivalled*, the seventh book in Reid's *Game Changers* series that is slated for publication in September, already number close to 400.

"We're not surprised it's doing so well because we think it's an amazing piece of work," Zevlever says. "We're happy that more people are finding out about the joys of romance. Many things that are enjoyed by women, or things that young people enjoy, are usually seen as something that's not literary or not worth looking at, so it's kind of nice to see for once that we're the trendsetters."

Toronto's Glad Day Bookshop has moved to a new, small location away from its longtime home in the city's gay village neighbourhood, and doesn't have the space to keep many copies of books in stock. Still, *Heated Rivalry* is the store's most special-ordered title. "Our gay male readers are loving the series and accusations that this is written to appeal to a purely female audience are wildly exaggerated," Michael Erickson says.

Reid's agent, Deidre Knight says the *Game Changers* series has sold more than 2.5 million copies so far. Foreign rights have been sold to more than 27 territories, with more deals still in progress. Reid had been published internationally before the show aired, but Elaine Spencer at the Knight Agency says that foreign interest has snowballed since then.

"People everywhere are responding to the show's widespread message of acceptance, and the love found in these characters' decisions and journeys," Spencer says. "Rachel has created characters that so many readers and viewers can relate to. Everyone is deeply invested and everyone loves that the show doesn't shy away from any part of the love story."

Mathieu Lauzon-Dicsó, store and events director at Montreal's bilingual bookstore-cafe Joie de Livres, tells *Q&Q* that Rachel Reid's books were the store's bestsellers in 2025, and are their bestsellers for 2026 so far. The store has held events with Reid and the show's actors, and is looking ahead to hosting an event this spring when a new French edition of *Heated Rivalry* will be released.

Although there is no way to quantify exactly what it is about the book and its story that has resonated so deeply for so many, indie booksellers think it's the story's joyful happy ending, and the representation it offers, that is part of what is drawing both readers and viewers.

Jo Treggiari, co-owner of Block Shop Books in Lunenburg, N.S. where the book and its series mates have also been selling well, takes delight in being able to call *Heated Rivalry* a mainstream book with mass appeal.

"She [Reid]'s from Halifax, it's hockey, it's queer. It feels like Canada is just winning right now, especially the way things are in the world," Treggiari says. "I just love that we've got this huge gay romance hockey Canadian thing happening. It's happening in the States, happening in Russia, people are finding a way to watch it – how great is that?"

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