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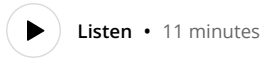
TONSIL HOCKEY

Heated Rivalry and the Big Business of Hockey Romance Novels

The queer hockey romance—and the genre's enduring and exploding popularity—is about so much more than dudes on skates.



BY KASE WICKMAN
DECEMBER 23, 2025



It may seem to some that the popularity of *Heated Rivalry*, the queer hockey romance TV show adapted from **Rachel Reid**'s book of the same name, came out of nowhere. But in a world rife with anxiety, patriarchal structures, and celebrity obsession, it begins to feel almost inevitable that the show is dominating our headspace and social media feeds, turning water cooler chatter to the emotional meaning of a lengthy monologue delivered in Russian, or an explicit sex scene between two male hockey players with their gigantic, glorious butts on full, proud display.

For some steamy hockey romance book recommendations, click [here](#).

And, spoiler, people aren't flocking to the show and the overstuffed shelves of hockey romance titles because they love the sport—the popularity of hockey romances, one of the most prevalent subgenres in kissing books, is more about the scoring than the shooting, if you catch my drift.

“I don't watch hockey,” **Megan**, a millennial woman who asked that her last name not be used, tells *Vanity Fair*. “I played sports my whole life, I love sports movies, I love sports documentaries,” but watching actual *games*? Not so much. She'd rather be reading. In 2025, she's read 230 books (so far, the year's not over yet), the bulk of which are hockey romances like *Heated Rivalry* and the rest of Reid's Game Changers series.

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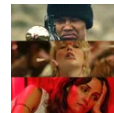
BY STEFANIA CONRIERI



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BY HADLEY HALL MEARES



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BY SAVANNAH WALSH

Her sports fandom is all about the plot.

To one reader, the athletics of hockey romances are “kind of the least interesting part of it.”

“I like the human aspect of it, and that's similar with books and documentaries,” she explains. “I like to hear about the people in their real life and how they got there, why they are the way that they are. That's similar with romances: I like the story behind the scenes.”

The athletics, to her, are “kind of the least interesting part of it.”

Taylor Capizola, the general manager of romance bookstore **The Ripped Bodice's** original Culver City location, has long been enthusiastically recommending Reid's series, the original trade paperback editions of which bore a cover with two ripped male torsos, bare above the waistlines of their hockey pants, canted suggestively toward one another. It's been a bestseller at the store since its release in 2019, but the 60 or so copies Capizola had backstocked ran out within two days of the show's premiere on HBO Max in late November.

Libraries, too, saw interest in the series explode. OverDrive, the e-book and audiobook lending service used by many American public libraries (the Libby

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lending app is a subsidiary), shared data with *VF* showing that there was a whopping 698 percent increase in activity—that includes checkouts, tags, and hold requests—for *Heated Rivalry* alone from 21 days after the show’s premiere, compared to 21 days before. Compared to this time in 2024, the book has seen a 10,534 percent increase in activity.



Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams attend the premiere of "Heated Rivalry" at TIFF Lightbox on November 24, 2025 in Toronto, Ontario. HAROLD FENG/GETTY IMAGES

Capizola says the title has long been a crowd pleaser: “We'll literally throw it at any single person who even vaguely mentions that they want something that's gay or something that's sports or something that's erotica, it's pretty much the first book that staff recommend.” And, like Megan, she says, “I'm not a big sports person, but if I had to go to a sports game, I would pick hockey.”

The sport’s appeal, to her, is in its contrasts, which makes for fertile ground for romances too. “These men are capable of being very nimble, being very



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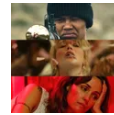
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agile, and almost lyrical in their movements,” she says.
 “And then they’ll just punch someone in the face.”

“Those guys, like, they go to work and they kick ass, and they get the shit beat out of them, and they get into fights,” said one reader. “And then they come home, they’re like, ‘Baby, how’s your day? Do you want me to rub your feet? Did you want me to make you a snack?’”

Even comedian **Paul Scheer** couldn’t resist, [in 2018 live-tweeting his spiral into obsession](#) after picking up a hockey romance on a whim.

Another super-reader, **Laura McCormack**, a 40-year-old who lives outside of Chicago and devours more than 100 romance books a year, loves the contrast of public and private personae in *Heated Rivalry*, invoking the character archetype of the “cinnamon roll.”

“Those guys, like, they go to work and they kick ass, and they get the shit beat out of them, and they get into fights, and then they come home, they’re like, ‘Baby, how’s your day? Do you want me to rub your feet? Did you want me to make you a snack?’”

The heel-turn from bruiser on skate blades to domestic sweaterboy is something of an antidote to the wave of toxic masculinity in the real world. It’s no coincidence that the [popularity of romance novels](#) shot up in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic made real-life happy endings feel anything but guaranteed.

For Megan, romance books became an escape hatch. “I don’t drink, I don’t do drugs,” she says. A dose of romance helps her with the anxiety that comes with “life as an adult, motherhood, divorce, all this stuff.” And though the first romance books she read were



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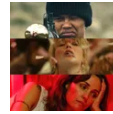
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about relationships between male and female characters, she now almost exclusively reads male/male plots.



Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams in *Heated Rivalry*. SABRINA LANTOS/HBO MAX.

“As a woman, you have a lot of societal external noise about the way that a woman's supposed to be,” she says. “Whether I want to or not, I naturally am going to compare myself a little bit to the female character, whereas with a male/male [pairing, I don’t].”

Plus, she says, “I love seeing men being vulnerable.”

Elizabeth Held, author of the [upcoming nonfiction book *Romancelandia*](#) and co-founder of the [D.C.-area Really Reading Romance Book Club](#), says that *Heated Rivalry* has become so popular that her book club started a spin-off WhatsApp group dedicated to the book and show when the main channel got clogged with hockey memes and episode reactions. It’s been pinging nonstop for weeks. The popularity of the hockey trope in romance novels isn’t news to her: Last December, her club “did a [choose your own hockey romance](#), just because there's been so many of them. Everyone in our club was almost able to read a different one without really trying.”

Beyond the plays on masculinity and the easy set pieces that hockey offers—road games, rinks, and The Big Game are all familiar concepts—Held pointed out the racial elephant in the locker room: “Hockey is really one of the few sports where you can field an all-white team and it passes the eye roll test,” she says.

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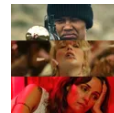
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Indeed, in 2022, the NHL conducted its **first internal demographic study** and found that more than 90 percent of players and coaches in the league are white, a stat that doesn't get much better when expanded to all league staff, where it skewed about 83.6 percent white. The same year, the league's social impact lead said that **about 25 percent of fans** were people of color.

“It’s the nature of hockey itself, its whiteness, its insularity, that allows for the genre to really, like, explode,” author Ngozi Ukazu said of the genre’s diversity problem. **“It’s romance reader catnip.”**

“I really hope, explicitly, people aren't being like, ‘Oh, I am trying to pick up a white romance,’” Held says. “I am unfortunately sure that there is, like, a group of people that does that, right? But I think a lot of it is [that] like follows like, and when you look at the books that have exploded on Instagram, or BookTok, which has been a huge driver of hockey romance, they all tend to be overwhelmingly by white authors and about white characters.”

Ngozi Ukazu has witnessed both the popularity and paleness of hockey romance firsthand: She’s the creator of the queer hockey rom-com *Check, Please!*, which began as a free webcomic in 2013, got a physical printing thanks to record-breaking Kickstarter campaigns, the first of which was in 2015, and then was picked up to a traditional publishing deal.

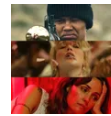
“I feel like no one wants to point this out, right?” she says of the diversity problem. Ukazu is Black, and says that she’s been toying with releasing another installment of her series, exploring the plotlines of side characters, including non-white players on the story’s fictional hockey team. “It’s the nature of



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hockey itself, its whiteness, its insularity, that allows for the genre to really, like, explode. It's romance reader catnip.”

Still, as Ukazu says, a rising tide lifts all boats, including the S.S. *Check, Please!* She's hopeful that the success of *Heated Rivalry*, as well as another queer romance **graphic novel-turned-TV show *Heartstopper***, will make the dream of seeing her work onscreen into a reality: The book has been optioned for adaptation.

Meanwhile, the success of *Heated Rivalry* has bled into real life in multiple ways: At a recent Boston Bruins game, t.A.T.u.'s song “All the Things She Said,” which soundtracked a recent pivotal yearning scene in the show, **played over the arena's PA**. The fans, as they say, went wild. Some readers, like McCormack, got curious about the sport that happened between her favorite characters' trysts, and is now a budding fan of the NHL's Seattle Kraken. (She enjoys their mascot, a giant blue troll.) “I'm not a sports person, and then all of a sudden I was,” she says.



Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams in *Heated Rivalry*. SABRINA LANTOS/HBO MAX.

And when hockey comes up in conversation, she doesn't hesitate to mention the reading material that brought her to the sport: “If someone wants to talk to me about hockey, I will absolutely talk to them about hockey. If they ask, ‘Oh, why did you get into it?’ I'm like, ‘Oh, my God, have you heard of hockey romance? It's amazing.’”

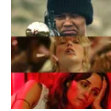
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And if they yuck her yum, showing disdain for queer hockey smut, then she knows they're not for her: "If I have to dim the things I'm excited about in order to be cool to someone, then I don't want to be their friend," she says.

The cross-fandom pollination has gone in the opposite direction as well.

"I've seen hockey reporters say, like, I've got a bunch of new followers, if you want to learn the game, like, what do you want to know?" Held says. Show creator **Jacob Tierney** has been a [guest on the hockey podcast *What Chaos*](#), and the *Empty Netters* podcast now recaps each *Heated Rivalry* episode. "I love it when people find a new passion. So I hope this leads to romance readers becoming hockey fans and hockey fans becoming romance readers, right? And then ideally, we would get a romance novel in like a year or two about people, one person from each fandom and how they fell in love together."

The breakout success of the show has felt validating to readers, who hope to see more like it in the future, including plotlines of acceptance, diversity, and anti-homophobia that Reid explores in the series, which Held calls "very explicitly a critique of the NHL."

In the here and now, however, romance enthusiasts are thrilled with the show's success, and ready to welcome new fans into the fold.

"There's a cool feeling of like, oh my God, we've known about this for so long," Capizola says. "People are like, where did this come from? And we're all like, it's been here, welcome. There's, like, seven more books [in the series]."

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