



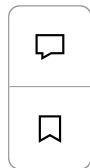
MANISHA KRISHNAN CULTURE DEC 19, 2025 6:00 AM

From Queer-Baiting to Neurodivergence: *Heated Rivalry's* Author Tackles Fan Theories and Controversy



"I didn't expect this book to be analyzed like *The Great Gatsby*," hockey smut author Rachel Reid tells WIRED.

Still from *Heated Rivalry*. PHOTOGRAPH: SABRINA LANTOS; HBO



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RACHEL REID DIDN'T intend for anyone to write a dissertation about her horny little gay hockey series.

Then again, the Nova Scotia author behind the *Game Changers* series could never have anticipated the level of fanfare that's accompanied the television adaptation of her books: *Heated Rivalry*.

The show, commissioned by Canada's Crave and distributed by HBO Max in the US, debuted in late November and quickly became a massive hit. It's the number one Crave original series of all time, and it also climbed to number 1 on HBO Max. A second season has already been greenlit.

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If you're not watching it yet, you know someone who is. (Full disclosure: I threw a *Heated Rivalry*-themed holiday party last week, which just meant playing it on mute in my apartment for the vibes.) From [Reddit](#) to BookTok, the show and its source material have also sparked a lot of discourse, ranging from speculation about lead character Shane's neurodivergence, commentaries about race in hockey, and accusations that Reid favors mischievous Russian Ilya over Shane.

"I didn't expect this book to be analyzed like *The Great Gatsby* when I wrote it. It's really just a hockey romance," Reid, now a New York Times bestselling author, tells me over Zoom, laughing. Still, she's flattered at the time people have spent theorizing. "I'm impressed with some of the things that people have really dug into. I feel like some of them make me sound a lot smarter than I am."

The show also sparked criticism from *I Love LA* star Jordan Firstman, who told [Vulture](#) that the intimacy depicted on the show is "not how gay people fuck." He went on to say that lead actors Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie should out themselves if they are gay. The actors, who Williams described as "best friends," have been posting flirty videos with each other, and even have matching "sex sells" tattoos, but neither has disclosed his sexual orientation. "A gay guy would say it," Firstman told Vulture. "I don't respect you because you care too much about your career and what's going to happen if people think you're gay."

The comments prompted fellow *Heated Rivalry* actor François Arnaud to clap back on Instagram, commenting "Should the sex that closeted hockey

players have look like the sex that sceney LA gay guys have?" (Firstman has since apologized and the spat seems to have blown over.)

Here's what Reid had to say about all the discourse surrounding everyone's favorite hockey smut and why so many women are obsessed with the genre.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

MANISHA KRISHNAN: As a fellow Canadian, hockey is just in the air that we breathe. Is it a sport that you found inherently sexy or horny?

RACHEL REID: No, I wouldn't say so. I don't think I ever really felt that way about it. I think, for me, I'm using these books to work out some thoughts about men and masculinity. It's not really that I'm hot for hockey players. I'm just using hockey because I know a lot about hockey. So that's a good backdrop for my story, but it's also a good backdrop for my story because of all the toxic masculinity there.

How did you end up writing hockey smut?

I just had this idea about what it might be like to be a closeted NHL player, and then to come out as the first openly gay NHL player. So it was just like something that had been on my mind for a while. And I thought about it as writing it as a romance with a happy ending. And, yeah, I guess I just enjoyed writing the sexy scenes too, so they got in there.

I mean, the hockey romance genre has a big following on BookTok. Why do you think that is?

When my first book came out, publishers were starting to look for hockey romance actively. But now it's a really, really huge subgenre of romance. I don't know the reasons, but I do think a big part of it is that a lot of people don't really know much about hockey, so it's not something that they're going to nitpick the details of. It doesn't really matter to them how realistic it is. But it's also an exciting, dangerous sport with a really weird set of skills that you have to learn. So it's just different. I think if you're not somebody who grew up in hockey culture, it's almost a sci-fi thing.

One of the Reddit posts referenced how you had mentioned that Ilya has grief and trauma and

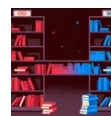
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Shane does not. And some of the commenters were like, "How could Shane not have trauma as an Asian man in a very white-dominated sport, or being a closeted man?" People were saying that that is indicative of your blind spots as an author. I'm curious what you make of that criticism?

I totally welcome that criticism. I don't think *Heated Rivalry* is a, you know, excellent representation of an Asian-Canadian person. But for me, that specific note that they're referring to was from my own personal notes on the characters. The trauma Ilya carries is very specific around the death of his mother. And Shane is a character who's always been very loved and supported and a little bit sheltered by his parents. Ilya has not had that, his father was really awful, and his mother died very young when he was young. And so he carries a lot of trauma that he doesn't talk about and hasn't processed and hasn't dealt with in a healthy way, whereas Shane hasn't had that sort of trauma.

Do you favor Ilya as a character? This is like another comment that I've seen quite a bit of.

I have too. Shane is probably my—I mean, I don't want to pick favorites, but Shane, to me, has the hero arc of the series. If you take their two books, Shane, I think, has the hero's arc, and he's my favorite character to write, especially from his point of view. So no, I don't prefer one over the other. They're very different characters. I think they're fun to write for different reasons, and there are different reasons to like them, and there are different reasons why they're sometimes very frustrating characters.

I want to talk about Shane being neurodivergent. That was not expressed in the books, correct? But you have since said that he is. How did that come about? Is that something that you had already been thinking about? Because that's definitely something a lot of the fans have commented on.

So that's something that I think is expressed in the book. It's just not explicitly stated, because I don't think the character of Shane would be aware of it himself, or it's not something that he would be looking into. In *Heated Rivalry*, he's very young, and he's a superstar, and he's surrounded by hockey



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players. And I just don't think it's something that he's thinking about.

I think it's plausible Shane might go the rest of his life without ever being diagnosed or even really thinking seriously about it. But to me, as the person who created him, that was definitely a part of his character, and it's something that, as I continued writing him, became clearer as I myself learned more about autism.

There are a bunch of references to Shane being a boring Canadian and being teased for that. Do you think he is actually boring, or is that more just playing off a stereotype about us?

I don't think he's as boring as the characters around him like to tease him for being, because I think he's quite funny. I don't know, he's a hockey superstar, so he's not that boring. I think he's just focused. He's not like a party guy. He's not flashy, he's not spending his money on sports cars and cool clothes. Ultimately, he's a hockey star who's best friends with a movie star and is dating another hockey star. That's not boring. None of that's boring.

Let's talk about Jordan Firstman's comments that what the show depicts isn't how gay people have sex. I'm curious what you made of that and what you make of the conversation that's ensued around who gets to tell stories about queer people.

I'm not super familiar with what he said. I didn't really look into it too much. But I've been hearing the conversation around it for years. I knew it would be amplified by this show.

I feel personally, that as long as you're willing to be sensitive and thoughtful about what you're writing, and most importantly, are willing to listen to feedback from the community that you're trying to represent, then you can write what you want to write. But you have to be careful and sensitive. And certainly, if you're getting criticism or feedback from the community that you're representing, you should listen to it and take notes.

Show creator Jacob Tierney said, with respect to the actors, that he didn't think that there was any

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reason to get into their sexual orientations. Have you fielded similar criticisms?

I know, generally women who write romances about two or more men get criticized. I haven't heard a lot of it directed at me specifically, but I agree with Jacob about the actors, and I extend that to myself and anyone else involved with the show or these books. I think it's OK to keep your personal life personal.

When I was in my early twenties, I wrote some *Smallville* fanfic. I wouldn't say I was active in the fandom, but I had a LiveJournal and was doing that. I shouldn't even say that. People would dig it up somehow, but it's long gone, guys, and it's terrible. Don't do it.

I know that season 2 of the show has been announced. Do you have plans to write another book with these characters?

I've always said no, but, you know, I think like stories maybe. I mean, I'm always thinking about these guys.

Are you working on any books right now?

I am. I'm not allowed to talk about it, because it's going to be announced in January.

Being Canadian and seeing this show blow up—it's all over every American publication—what's that aspect of it been like for you?

It's been really surreal and amazing. I still can't really believe how much people have embraced the show. I feel like it's a really unlikely hit, but I think it's a nice thing to be a hit right now. It's really joyful, and I know that some of the episodes are sad, but it is ultimately a joyful show. It's sweet, it's romantic, it's nice, and I think it's a nice thing to have right now.

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