Exclusive

Heated Rivalry's Rachel Reid on developing Shane and Ilya, their group chat and queer literature: 'Ilya changed a lot!'

Mar 22 • Written by Anna-Lena Mahler

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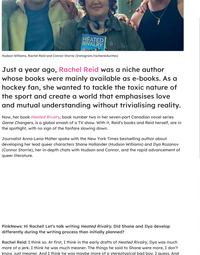


Hudson Williams, Rachel Reid and Connor Storrie (Instagram/rachelreidwrites)

Just a year ago, Rachel Reid was a niche author whose books were mainly available as e-books. As a hockey fan, she wanted to tackle the toxic nature of the sport and create a world that emphasises love and mutual understanding without trivialising reality.

Now, her book *Heated Rivalry*, book number two in her seven-part Canadian novel series *Game Changers*, is a global smash of a TV show. With it, Reid's books and Reid herself, are in the spotlight, with no sign of the fanfare slowing down.

Journalist Anna-Lena Mahler spoke with the *New York Times* bestselling author about developing her lead queer characters Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), her in-depth chats with Hudson and Connor, and the rapid advancement of queer literature.

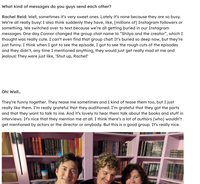
PinkNews: Hi Rachel! Let's talk writing *Heated Rivalry*. Did Shane and Ilya develop differently during the writing process than initially planned?

Rachel Reid: I think so. At first, I think in the early drafts of *Heated Rivalry*, Ilya was much more of a jerk. I think he was much meaner. The things he said to Shane were more, I don't know, just meaner. And I think he was maybe more of a stereotypical bad boy, I guess. And I think I softened him a little bit and I softened Shane a little bit. Shane's always been pretty much, he was always kind of like the main character, kind of in my head for that first book. So he was pretty much the same. I'd say right from the beginning. But yeah, Ilya, I think changed a lot. Just as I dug deeper into him.

If Ilya and Shane weren't pro athletes, what do you think they would do instead?

Endless ways to wear.

Oh, well, I feel like Shane would just be like a personal trainer or physiotherapist or something pretty basic [but] still fitness. And I don't know, Ilya would probably, I – I guess he's too hot to be a race car driver, but he'd want to be. I think he'd do something dangerous. I don't know, maybe he'd be a pilot. Maybe he's rock star. Who knows? We'd do something. Definitely something with dogs. He loves dogs.



Rachel Reid attends the premiere of Heated Rivalry in Toronto, Ontario. (Getty)

Q: Did you did you intend to write a Shane as an autistic character?

Rachel Reid: Yeah, I did. When I wrote the first book, it was more about his overall personality. But I've talked about before, how in the time between *Heated Rivalry* and *The Long Game*, my own child was getting assessed for things like ADHD and autism. I learned a lot over those few years, and then I was like, 'Oh yeah, Shane is autistic.' By the time I wrote *The Long Game*, I was like, yeah, that's what it is.

Jacob knew right away. Jacob told me I think is the very first Zoom call, he was like, 'Well, Shane's autistic.' And I was like, 'Yeah, yeah.' He's definitely approached the character that way. And when I talked to Hudson about it, he said the same thing. He was like, 'Well, Wren Hollander, he's definitely on the spectrum.' Hudson's been very supportive of my comments about Shane and I heard Hudson be like, 'No, no, [he's] doing that because he's autistic.' And I was like, 'Yes, yes.'

I think because of that, which unfortunately is also common of people with autism, the things that Shane does and says get misunderstood, sometimes by characters in the book and sometimes by readers who are like, 'Well, that was a terrible thing to say or do.' And it's like, well, he's not great at reading social cues. He's got a lot of intellectual poverty. He's very intelligent in certain areas. But he's, he's, he's, he's, he's very, very, very, very, very, very, very, that everybody involved with the character understands that and I didn't know how to explain it. Jacob got it. Hudson got it. I think most readers get it too. Lately I've been trying to just make it clear that, yes, he's an autistic character.

You said that you, Connor and Hudson are in a group chat together. What is the funniest message that you've gotten from them?

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Rachel Reid: Oh, man, there's been a lot. Those guys are nuts.

What kind of messages do you guys send each other?

Rachel Reid: Well, sometimes it's very sweet ones. Lately it's none because they are so busy. We're all really busy. I also think suddenly they have, like, [millions of] Instagram followers or something. We switched over to text because we're all getting buried in our Instagram notifications. We switched over to text because we're all, we're, we're, we're busy. Which I thought was really nice. I can't even find that group chat! It's buried so deep now. And they're just funny. I think when I got to see the episodes, I got to see the rough cuts of the episodes and they didn't, any time I mentioned anything, they would just get really mad at me and jealous! They were just like, 'Shut up, Rachel!'

Hudson Williams, Connor Storrie and Rachel Reid (Instagram/rachelreidwrites)

Oh! Well...

They're funny together. They tease me sometimes and I kind of tease them too, but I just really like them. I'm really grateful that they auditioned. I'm grateful that they got the parts and that they want to talk to me. And it's lovely to hear from them talk about the books and stuff in interviews. It's nice that they mention me at all. I think there's a lot of authors [who] wouldn't get mentioned by actors or the director or anybody. But this is a great group. It's really nice.

When we look back into what counts as mainstream in literature, only a few years ago, queer characters were the side characters, the sidekick with tragic endings. And now, finally, mainstream publishing has picked up on the sense that everyone deserves a happy ending and romance. Do you feel that, in your lifetime, romance stories progressing from a niche genre to a mainstream romance genre?

It was great. I feel like definitely the big turning point was *Red, White & Royal Blue* because *Heated Rivalry* came out in March of 2019. I believe that, *White & Royal Blue* came out in May or April. It was right after, and that was one of the first books that was like a love story between two men that I saw get that kind of marketing push, like it was in stores everywhere. I remember it was [at] airports, you know, it was everywhere.

I think a lot of us who were writing queer romance at the time were like, 'Holy smokes! This is going to change everything.' And it kind of did, because before that queer romance just wasn't in stores. It wasn't in the romance section. It was nowhere. You could special order it, maybe if it was even in print. But most of them were e-book only or self-published, and you could find them online. But it was, it was, it was, it was still very, very, very underground thing. Then suddenly it became a much bigger thing. Now there's tables and big bookselers that are just queer romance right at the front of the store. It's very, very different.

My books were never in print until pretty recently, the *Game Changers* books were printed in paperback for the first time in November of last year. So, I'm, I'm really, I'm really, I'm, I'm, I'm