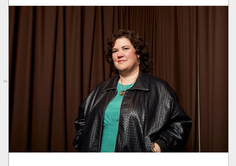
archive today
Saved from https://www.theguardian.com/observer/interviews/2026/mar/08/why-i-wrote-heated-rivalry
Search
20 Mar 2026 08:55:42 UTC
Webpage | Screenshot
Capture page and all linked files
Ad-free, free PDF, ZIP, JSON, WARC
Log in | Create an a | Wishlist (0) | Wish list (0)

Interviews
Friday 27 March 2026

Why I wrote Heated Rivalry

Rachel Reid's queer ice hockey romance series is an erotic power play. She explains why it has started conversations that are long overdue



Sarbani Elias
Observer

Share

Pictured by Dali Orlando

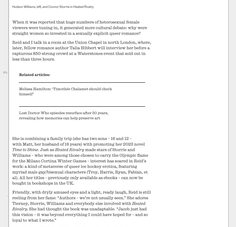
The Canadian author Rachel Reid realized she was part of something big when *Heated Rivalry* – the hit TV series based on her 2019 queer ice hockey romance novel – was discussed during CBC's New Year's Eve broadcast live from Times Square in New York. "You're watching with your family in New York City and they're discussing whether they've seen the show or not. It was like: What can I say, I'm sitting here talking about my characters," Reid tells me in still shocked tone.

Heated Rivalry details the steamy, closeted love affair between two male players in the fictional Major Hockey League: Canadian Shane Hollander, portrayed by Hudson Williams, and Russian Ilya Rozanov, played by Connor Storrie.

After its premiere last year on the Canadian streamer Crave – the show aired in the UK in January – it has morphed into a word-of-mouth phenomenon. It was the most watched series for Crave, while averaging 3 million viewers an episode on HBO Max in the US.

Titles from Reid's Game Changers hockey romance series *Heated Rivalry* and her other Ilya/Shane novel, *The Long Game*, plus the companion novella *Heated Rivalry: Exhibition* have been featured on the New York Times and Sunday Times bestseller lists. Canada's former prime minister Justin Trudeau said he was a fan of the TV show. There were themed events and rates. Before the first series had finished, a second was commissioned, based on *The Long Game*.

While there have been popular LGBTQ+ romances before (the Netflix series *Heartstopper*, for example, and the US romcom movie *Red, White and Royal Blue*), mainstream romances featuring male characters authenticated the sensuality. You don't see actual sex acts, but it's explicit for mainstream: furs oral sex, and sex, masturbation, graphic dialogue ("Did you enjoy sucking my cock?") and noisy orgasms. When Ilya and Shane aren't getting it on in hotel suites or sports stadium shower cubicles, they're passionately emoting their love for each other.



Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie in Heated Rivalry

When it was reported that huge numbers of heterosexual female viewers were tuning in, it generated more cultural debate: why were straight women so invested in a sensually explicit queer romance?

Reid and I talk in a room at the Crave Chapel in north London, where, later, fellow romance author Talia Hibbert will interview her before a rapturous 850-strong crowd at a Waterstones event that sold out in less than three hours.

Related articles

William Hazlitt: "Unwitlin Chaloner should check himself"

Lost Doctor Who episodes resurface after 60 years, revealing how memories can help preserve art

She is combining a family trip (she has two sons – 16 and 12 – and her husband, Dave Reid, accompanies her) with a book tour (*Heated Rivalry: Exhibition*, *Heated Rivalry* and *The Long Game*) to promote *Heated Rivalry*. She was among those chosen to carry the Olympic flame for the Milano Cortina Winter Games – interest has soared in Reid's work: a kind of metaverse of queer ice hockey erotica, featuring myriad male gay/bisexual characters (Troy, Harris, Ryan, Fabian, et al). All her titles – previously only available as ebooks – can now be bought in bookshops in the UK.

Friendly, with dryly amused eyes and a light, really laugh, Reid is still in shock at the success of her work. Her publication date for *Heated Rivalry*, Thursday, Williams and everybody else involved with *Heated Rivalry*, film had thought the book was unadaptable. "Jacob just had this vision – it was beyond everything I could have hoped for – and so hyped to what it wrote."

She had also expected *Heated Rivalry* to appeal to fans of her books and be a "Canada only" thing: "This is way beyond anything you dream about as an author," she says.

The TV show is popular for mainstream fans

Reid's books explore queer themes – prejudice, sensuality – but they're also much more sexually explicit even than the TV series in her *Heated Rivalry*, spiralling passages are devoted to a single blowjob.

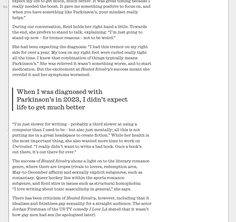
How did she research it – or did she just dream it up?

"I, you know, had some experience, some conversations, and then I extrapolated from that," she says. Her friends were supportive and the books maybe people have ideas about sex. They're not sure what to expect when they meet me ... I'm just ... normal."

Reid's family and parents are proud of her success but, she tells me, in the past, she was reluctant to tell people she wrote queer hockey romances – because it was difficult to explain. "Since I've written some out, I don't have to explain, I just say: *Heated Rivalry* and people know."

A lifelong inhabitant of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Reid is pseudonym her real name is Rachelle Gagnon) became interested in erotica as a teenager. She took a political science degree and was aiming for law school, but her parents intervened. "They said, 'Why don't you take my sister off?'" to raise money for sex workers was a turning point. "It introduced me to a whole lot of cool queer people. It was 'Oh, there are the kind of people I want to hang out with.' ... I don't think I would write the books I write now if I hadn't done that back then."

She started writing hockey romance as a "creative outlet" as a young mother – sometimes while sitting on her children's beds as they went to sleep. Her dad was a hockey player and coach and, like most of Canadians, she wrote in the spirit of affinity: "I wanted to write a book addressing homophobia in hockey." While there's a more out culture in women's hockey, there are still no out male National Hockey League (NHL) players. "It's a very homophobic culture. More than other sports."



Heated Rivalry is Canadian streaming service Crave's most watched series

She's been pleasantly surprised by the reaction in hockey circles. The NHL's commissioner, Gary Bettman, said he'd watched *Heated Rivalry*. She also heard there was a 20% plus boost in NHL ticket sales since the series aired. "People in the hockey world told me it's started conversations that have been long overdue. That's really exciting."

The third book, *Unrivaled*, will feature Ilya and Shane as out, married thirtysomethings. It was due this year but was put back to June 2027 because Reid underwent treatment for breast cancer last year, which she explained to fans in a heartfelt Instagram post.

Reid was diagnosed with the condition in 2023. Four days later, she received a message from Tiffany, who had read her books in lockdown and wanted to adapt *Heated Rivalry*.

"When I was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2023, I didn't think I was going to enter the best period of my life," she says wryly. "I didn't expect my life to get much, much better. It was great timing because I really needed the boost. It gave me something positive to focus on, and when you have something like Parkinson's, your mindset really helps."

During our conversation, Reid looks her right hand a little. Towards the end, she prefers to stand to talk, explaining: "I'm just going to stand up now – for tremor reasons – not to be weird."

She had been expecting the diagnosis: "I had this tremor on my right side, and I knew that I had Parkinson's. I was pretty sure I knew right all the time. I knew that combination of things typically means Parkinson's." She was relieved it wasn't something worse, and to start medication. But the excitement at *Heated Rivalry*'s success meant she overdid it and her symptoms worsened.

When I was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2023, I didn't expect life to get much better

"I'm just slower for writing – probably a third slower at using a computer than I used to be – but also just mentally all this is not putting me in a great headspace to create fiction." While her health is the most important thing, she also wanted more time to work on *Unrivaled*. "I really didn't want to write a bad book. Once a book's out there, it's out there for ever."

The success of *Heated Rivalry* shows a light on to the literary romance genre, where there are tropes (rivals to lovers, redemption arcs, *Map vs December* affairs) and sexually explicit subgenres, such as dirty talk, bondage, BDSM, and "spice" (sex without emotional subgenre, and Reid sets its issues such as structural misogyny. "I love writing about toxic masculinity in general," she says.

There has been criticism of *Heated Rivalry*, however, including that it idealizes and fetishizes gay sexuality for a straight audience. The writer Jordan Foreman of the US TV comedy *I Love LA* stated on X that it's how gay men had (or the apologized later)

"I remember somebody saying that, and that it was like a whole thing," says Reid. "But I think, generally, there's lots of ways people can be gay and there's lots of representation. I don't think it's a bad thing." She is "very sensitively and thoughtfully and talk to people and make it somewhat realistic – even though it's also fantasy."

Also, while Reid focuses on men, she isn't against writing female-based erotica: "I'd love to! I'd very much like to write a book with female main characters."

What about all the theories relating to how strangely straight women respond to *Heated Rivalry*? One was that, wearying of the dark side of heterosexuality (in it apps, or violent pornography), they're drawn to explicit but consensual queer sex, untainted by misogyny and gender imbalance, but also connected and emotional.

"There are a lot of theories," she smiles. "It's either really complicated or really simple. I've heard the gender politics side of things – and I've also heard people say: 'Oh, I just think it's hot!'"

Williams as Ilya Rozanov

Reid points out that women are the biggest consumers of fiction and romance. "The emotional vulnerability in really attractive to a lot of women ... But also, some women like to remove themselves if they're reading sex scenes. Maybe because of their own history. *Gay Bed* more comfortable if they don't see themselves in it."

She agrees it's strange how sex scenes could be surprised by how sexual women are. "Women are sexual beings too – with desires and libidos and stuff. I'm a woman, I'm sexual, I like to read erotica and I like to write it." Reid says *"Fifty Shades of Grey* was important for any fans of sexually explicit books ... removing some of the stigma of reading books like that."

As a romance writer, does she feel there's snobbery towards any genre that predominantly women enjoy?

"Yeah, I think that's why I was ashamed to say that I was writing these kinds of books for so long. It's something people are dismissive about. They don't understand and they don't want to understand."

When the author, whose creation unpopularly disquitted gay sex for a generation, pitch back to Nova Scotia, she will continue writing *Unrivaled*. The book takes a lot of pressure, like the whole world is waiting for it.

She sometimes feels nostalgic, too, for the old days of tapping away on an iPad on her children's beds. "It was pure joy back then. It wasn't a job ... I was just writing for me."

Heated Rivalry, Reid explains, was originally conceived as a standalone book. "I didn't intend to follow them to retirement and beyond. I'm glad I didn't do that."

Will it stop with *Unrivaled* – as a trilogy?

"A trilogy is probably good. I'm going to try to wrap it up," Reid laughs. "But I said these wouldn't be another one after *The Long Game*, and now there is ... Who knows?"

Newsletters
Choose the newsletters you want to receive

Daily Newsmaker
M T W T F S S

The Observer Daily
M T W T F S S

The Pseudo Edit
M T W T F S S

View more

For information about how The Observer protects your data, read our Privacy Policy

Photographs by Alamy

Interviews | Television

This site is on ta. For unlimited access to The Observer, start your 21 trial today.