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"Heated Rivalry" Is the "Moby-Dick" of Canadian Gay Hockey Shows

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7.15.2026

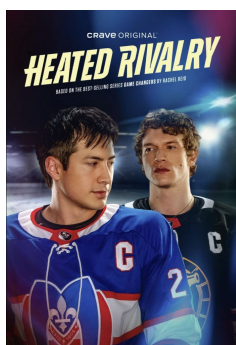
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Hester Blum

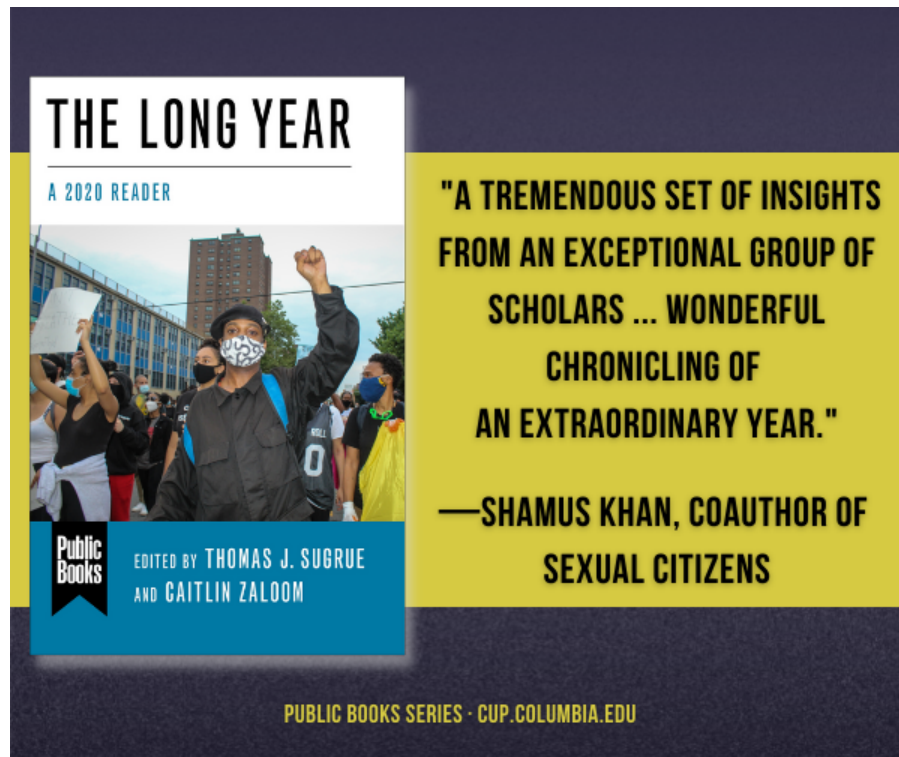
Being reviewed:



Heated Rivalry

Created by Jacob Tierney
Crave, 2025–

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Heated Rivalry is the *Moby-Dick* of Canadian gay hockey shows.

By one metric I am late to the genre of MM: “male-male romance.” I first streamed *Heated Rivalry* six months ago, but have now rewatched the six-episode series too many times to admit; read the source material novels by Rachel Reid; consumed *Heated Rivalry* fanfic on AO3 (ask me for my recs); and have been rewarded with a social media algorithmic wall that knows no other culture outside of the queer hockey world. This world was built by Reid and by *Heated Rivalry* showrunner Jacob Tierney; it is centrally inhabited by the characters Ilya Rozanov (hot, curly-haired Russian bisexual menace) and Shane Hollander (pretty, freckled Wasian-Canadian hockey machine). By another metric, I’ve been immersed in MM romance my entire adult reading life: For 35 years, I’ve been

reading and rereading, writing and rewriting about, teaching and reteaching Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

A novel whose genre boundaries are porous, *Moby-Dick* drifts between travelogue, drama, revenge tragedy, cetological taxonomy, *When Animals Attack!*–style adventure, suicide note, philosophical meditation, variety of religious experience, and natural history (among other forms I could list). But my task here is to consider *Moby-Dick* as an example of MM romance, because of how it represents the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. Ishmael’s initial fear of his pre-voyage bedmate, Queequeg, the heavily tattooed, head-peddling, Polynesian harpooneer, is swiftly overcome as Ishmael joins Queequeg in marriage and cuddling affection over a shared pipe.

Compare the moment Ilya Rozanov’s lighter clicks in the Saskatchewan cold of the first frames of episode 1 of *Heated Rivalry*, awaiting the electric charge of Shane Hollander’s hand—the “one warm spark in the heart of an arctic crystal”—before it can ignite. The ship in which I am able to think about anything else has sailed.

Maybe in your obsession with the gay hockey show you, too, have found yourself thinking about *Moby-Dick*. Talk about queer angst and yearning! Ishmael quietly took to the sea with Queequeg so that Shane and Ilya could shower together. The closeted hockey boys of *Heated Rivalry* and the young sailor Isolatoes of *Moby-Dick* have some notable commonalities, as individuals and couples. In the

MM romance plots of both texts, Shane and Ishmael are aligned, as are Ilya and Queequeg.

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Queer Joy Is Earned—and Requires Earnest Care



Tori McCandless

Let me break it down for you: Shane and Ishmael are both “boring,” but their rabbit holing, pedantry, info-dumping, and hyperfocus encompass oceanic depths of feeling. Both wait ambivalently in a hotel room for their man to arrive; Shane “might open” hotel room

1410, Ishmael might wait up at the Spouter Inn. Ishmael and Shane initially experience queer panic and almost immediately thereafter crash into bed with the man who makes them “curious” (spooned by Queequeg when they first share a bed, Ishmael “lay quietly eyeing him, having no serious misgivings now, and bent upon narrowly observing so curious a creature”; when Shane drops to his knees to give Ilya head seconds after Ilya first kisses him, the Russian asks “do I make you curious?” “Obviously,” Shane says).

Both Shane/“Jane” and [“call me”] Ishmael use aliases. The yearning, depressive, lonely young men find their angst eased with ecstatic sperm squeezing and the “universal thump” of being knocked about a bit.

Their counterparts, Ilya and Queequeg, are kings of consent and gentle caretakers. Ilya constantly checks in with Shane in their first sexual encounters: “What do you want to do?”; “You still want?”; “It’s okay?”; “Still okay?” Ishmael swiftly embraces Queequeg “affectionately throwing his brown tattooed legs over mine, and then drawing them back; so entirely sociable and free and easy,” but only after Queequeg communicates assurance that he “won’t touch a leg of ye” unless Ishmael wishes. Ilya/“Lily” and Queequeg/“Quohog” also have “queer” aliases. They are natural divers, swimmers among sharks in the water, closely observed and admired by Shane and Ilya from the safety of the pool or ship deck. Ilya and Queequeg both have intimidating tattoos that reflect their national affiliations—Russian bear, Polynesian cosmos—and a

foreign swagger that covers for their exilic isolation from paternal expectation.

Both trouble their partners by smoking in bed. I could go on.

The love plots of *Heated Rivalry* and *Moby-Dick* have weird temporalities. Time passes quickly and jumps around at the outset of both texts and then dilates, spiralizes, slows to a delicious, attenuated friction. Both couples are apart a lot, too, even as they share the same jobs. The nonlinear temporalities of both texts inflect their worldbuilding, and the worldbuilding taken up by both texts' fans, as well.

My interest here is in key late moments of both works, in which rapid interstitial narrative time pauses to linger at a moment of profound melting. In *Heated Rivalry*, there is the quiet lakeside cottage; in *Moby-Dick*, there is the sentimental sperm squeezing of “A Squeeze of the Hand.”

For the Melville loon invested in unbounded potentialities of oceanic relation, *Heated Rivalry*'s sixth episode and Season 1 finale, “The Cottage,” bears a special charge. The toxic masculinity and casual homophobia of major league hockey (and the risks of a public bisexual identity for Ilya, given his Russian nationality) had kept the young rivals closeted. When concussed and high on painkillers, Shane invites Ilya to his cottage, and his sweetly slurred “will you come to my cottage” can be translated as “I love you and

want to be in a real relationship with you.” As Shane insists repeatedly to an Ilya worried about public and emotional exposure of their multiyear relationship should they take time and space with each other, the cottage is “private,” “so private,” “super private.” The surprise coming out of a different hockey player, which changes things for Shane and Ilya, is key to the cottage world’s potentiality; that surprise is itself keyed on the show’s soundtrack to the song “I’ll Believe in Anything,” in which the band Wolf Parade sings “I’d take you where nobody knows you and nobody gives a damn.” The unexpected moment of another player’s queer openness liberates Ilya, ultimately, to utter the show’s most famous line: “I’m coming to the cottage.”

The literary genre of contemporary MM romance provides one structural realization of an imagined world that Melville was trying to write into being in *Moby-Dick*.

Earlier in the television show, at three significant moments of semi-privacy (the locker room showers, the All-Star hotel room adjoining another player, and the Sochi Olympics), Shane and Ilya stopped matters from escalating by saying to each other “*not here*”: recognizing that the world of their mounting intimacy would have

to be located elsewhere. The lakeside cottage world becomes their *yes, here*: the frozen water of Shane and Ilya’s ice hockey world begins to thaw at the cottage.

In their many years of hot, furtive hookups in hotel rooms and bedrooms, Ilya and Shane were tethered only by their next sext, unable to admit their love even to themselves. Not until the cottage—nearly a decade into the situationship that nearly “fucking kill[s]” them before their love speaks its name—do they hold hands and sleep the night in the same bed. Lakeside at the cottage, with Canadian wolf birds as their leviathans, Shane and Ilya start to build the still-evolving world they wish to bring into being, to inhabit, to expand beyond the privacy of the cottage.

This is one iteration of the world that José Esteban Muñoz called the “then and there of queer futurity”; the alterative universe (or AU) of fan fiction constellates infinite others.¹ In bodies of water, human and nonhuman affiliations, forms of knowledge, identity, time, and cultural and political taxonomies can atomize and dissolve. The lakeside cottage becomes Shane and Ilya’s whaleship, their insular Tahiti, their topgallant delight, the site of their joyous, ever-juvenile eternities.

Cottage time runs differently: It took Shane and Ilya no time at all to fuck each other but nine years to hold hands. Ishmael and Queequeg also hook up early in *Moby-Dick* (there is, after all, only

one bed at the inn!).² But it is not until late in the novel when the supreme peace, intimacy, and eroticism of oceanic male relation is fully realized in handholding:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally [...]. Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

As gorgeous and yearning as this scene is, it remains—unlike the evolution of the lovers in the *Heated Rivalry* universe—situational. Ishmael concedes with a deep pang that he cannot “keep squeezing that sperm forever!” Instead, he “must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country.” Ishmael’s domestic vision is not of queer cottage liberation but of wifed-up choking heterosexual mundanity. Ishmael’s fireside and saddle (unlike Shane’s cozy firepit and the invitation to “saddle up”), in other words, can never represent the standard of happiness of his visions of angelic men mutually squeezing sperm.

For Ishmael cannot come to relax at the cottage. His world is whelmed by the white whale and the sea, reduced to a coffin-lifebuoy that retains the traces of Queequeg’s tattoos but not his body. He never settles down in years of wild wanderings thereafter, even as we learn that Ishmael marks up his own flesh, belatedly, with tattoos that may or may not echo what is written on Queequeg’s skin.

Moby-Dick may imagine dizzying possibilities for potentially liberatory worlds, not just for queer intimacy but for intellectual revelation, for the elevation to glory of the “meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways” or Black sailors like Pip, “called a coward here, hailed a hero there!” i.e., in the “there” of “eternal time.” Yet the imagined worlds of *Moby-Dick* await a theoretical futurity that is not quite attained by Ishmael, much as the novel’s own literary unity is figured as a monumental cathedral never fully completed by Melville, its architect.

The “grand” “erections” of Melville’s literary ambition, I suggest modestly, are in part instantiated in the imaginative architecture of *Heated Rivalry*’s cottage.³ At the cottage, Ilya and Shane finally tell each other that they love each other. As they embrace, Shane asks, “does it fucking kill you too?”; Ilya replies “not anymore.”

Ultimately what kills me about *Heated Rivalry* is not just its dazzling, galvanic love story, nor its commitment to both narrative and erotic

caretaking, but how it makes me feel about the *not* [yet] *here* of Melville’s imaginaries. I recently talked about the show and the novel with Rachel O’Connell, a literature scholar and new friend. She cracked open what I’ve been scrabbling at in my *HR/MD* monomania: the literary genre of contemporary MM romance provides one structural realization of an imagined world that Melville was trying to write into being in *Moby-Dick*. The messy, unfinished architecture of the novel cannot, as Ishmael confesses, “be here, and at once, perfected.”

And not just in the novel: After all, Melville had asked Nathaniel Hawthorne to *his* cottage. In 1851, while composing *Moby-Dick*, he wrote Hawthorne a series of letters as heated by mid-19th-century standards as any scene in *Heated Rivalry*.⁴ In inviting his own possible situationship to come to his home—in his *first* known letter to Hawthorne—Melville, like a doped-up, concussed Shane, affects a lightness that doesn’t disguise its own feverishness: “I am not to be charmed out of my promised pleasure [...]. Your bed is already made, & the wood marked for your fire. [...] I keep the word ‘Welcome’ all the time in my mouth, so as to be ready on the instant when you cross the threshold.” This “welcome,” pleurably effervescent on the tongue but freighted with the unsaid, is Melville’s version of the Canada Dry ginger ale and Coca-Cola that Ilya and Shane stock for each other.

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Out of the Closet—and into the Coffin

Tavia Nyong'o

At some point the two men broke; Hawthorne seems to have pulled away, in a Berkshires version of *Heated Rivalry*'s tuna meltdown in Boston. When he later met up with Melville in England in 1856, Hawthorne recorded in his journal a fairly devastating picture of the man's state of belief and content:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and

informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated”; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation [...]. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief.

Melville—itchy, antic, discontented—can’t believe in anything, Hawthorne writes. The fulfilment of Shane’s invitation to come to the cottage, on the other hand, rings to the lyrics of “I’ll Believe in Anything.”

Heated Rivalry belatedly offers a way to believe in something—not just here, but now. For Melville, there is still time. 📖

This article was commissioned by Leah Price.

Footnotes:

1. Exploring the many worlds of *Heated Rivalry* fan fiction is another essay. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009). ↩
2. “Only one bed at the inn!” is an important trope invented by Melville, as Nate Wolff reminds us, along with:

weird guy

Something in the natural world is a symbol

weird animal

Only one bed at the inn!

Love triangle

Workplace romance

Interesting details

The sea

<https://bsky.app/profile/natewolff.bsky.social/post/3lzvgwdqjtk25>. ↩

3. I’m not even going to get into here the importance of “Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience” (the conclusion to Melville’s figuration of his novel as an unfinished grand erection, a cathedral, in chapter 32) to the modest Canadian streamer that hurled its young stars from restaurant serving jobs to Olympic torch bearing, SNL hosting, and Oscars attendance in just the first three months of the show’s release. ↩
4. These love letters have invited scholars to “ship” the two writers (in fan studies parlance, to ship is to imaginatively build a world in which the two are a couple). On shipping Melville and Hawthorne, and on *Moby-Dick* slash fiction, see Chip Badley’s excellent article “*Moby-Dick* from Below: Fans, Fictions, and Ship Theory,” *Leviathan* 27:3 (2025): 65–82. I’ve written very briefly about shipping and oceanic intimacies in “Shipping—An afterword,” *Atlantic Studies* 20.2 (2023): 361–3. Hawthorne’s replies to Melville are not known. ↩

Featured image: Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in *Heated Rivalry* (2025) / IMDb.

HEATED RIVALRY LITERATURE QUEER ROMANCE SEXUALITY SPORTS TV

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