

Instagram helps rekindle a love of poetry and a boom in sales

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Forget page-turners and celebrity memoirs; British readers seem to have rekindled their love of verse.

More than a million poetry books were sold in the last year, the highest number on record, as the popularity of social media sensations such as Rupi Kaur reinvigorates the artform. Sales are up 13%, to £10.5m, according to new figures from Nielsen Book Research.

Kaur, whose latest book went on sale this week, is at the heart of the boom. Her debut anthology, *Milk and Honey*, broke all records when it was released in 2016 and so far this year it has sold more copies than the rest of the top 10 poets combined. That is 20 times more than her arguably more famous contemporary, Kate Tempest, whose latest book, *Let Them Eat Chaos*, is also a bestseller.

“I’m kind of a nerd,” says Kaur. “I’ve always loved English class and I love reading books – but, the truth is, I never even understood the poetry we were given at school.”

Kaur, 25, moved from Punjab to Toronto when she was four, and grew up with English as a second language. “I was always a visual artist first,” she says.

When it came to writing poetry she looked at ways to form easy-to-understand verses, often so short you can read them in one breath. She is known for tackling hard subjects such as alcoholism head-on, but a lot of her work deals with love and relationships.

“I don’t want someone to read my poetry and think – what does that mean? So every time I’m writing, I’m thinking OK, what word can I take out? How do I make this more direct? What’s too technical?”

The quick-fire click-and-swipe culture of social media – Instagram especially – has been key to Kaur’s meteoric rise (she currently has 1.6 million followers on Instagram).

“I’ve heard someone describe it as fidget spinner poetry,” says Chris McCabe, who runs the poetry library at the Southbank Centre in London. “But it’s bringing lots of people to poetry who might otherwise never have engaged with it. And that’s a fantastic thing.”

Footfall has increased more than 20% over the past year, he says, thanks in part to Kaur. The library even has a specific genre entitled Instagram Poetry, because so many people had been asking for it.

“Thanks to social media we don’t rely on a critical interpretation of poetry to tell us what’s good any more,” McCabe says. “It’s the end of centuries of white male-dominated verse – and that’s a real breakthrough.”

Melissa Lee-Houghton, winner of this year’s Somerset Maugham award for her collection *Sunshine*, agrees there has been a power shift in contemporary poetry, and that young rebel poets – breaking the mould of traditional verse – are behind it.

“Poetry now appeals to a very wide audience of young people who didn’t think poetry was cool before. Now it’s the coolest thing,” she says.

Any night of the week in cities across Britain you can go to spoken-word open mic events, she says. “Anybody can go up and read something. It’s become more of a community thing.”

Lee-Houghton – whose latest work is entitled *Cumshot in D minor* – says she is seeing more and more poetry converts at her own live readings, too.

“They approach me afterwards and say, ‘I don’t normally read poetry but that’s really affected me. I’m going to go and buy some’,” she says.

The spoken word poet Luke Wright – who has a tour lined up for his forthcoming book *Frankie Vah* (an epic poem) – compares the current boom in poetry to the way hip-hop music went mainstream in the late 1990s. “Thanks to Eminem, suddenly a whole new bunch of people were listening to it,” he says.

YouTube and Instagram have been instrumental for the emerging underground poetry scene, Wright says. “You can take a punt on things with a video, in a way you don’t when you go to a gig or buy a book.”

This week, for example, Wright posted a poem online about Boris Johnson’s gaffe about dead bodies in Sirte, Libya, at the Conservative party conference. Within hours it went viral.

“Out of all the artforms, I think only spoken word poetry can respond that quickly,” he says.

Wright and Kaur are worlds apart in style and delivery, but both are tapping into a growing appetite for verse that is at once simple, current and hard-hitting.