

How young women are changing the rules of poetry Focus,

With teenage and 20-something women taking over from older men as poetry's biggest consumers, Donna Ferguson reports on the rise of a diverse, online community

The Observer · 27 genn. 2019

Charly Cox is explaining why she thinks her poetry is so popular with young women. "It's a really difficult age to articulate how you're feeling," she says. "We're all so stressed out. We're so confused, so lonely. Poetry is an incredible form of solace. If you encounter something in a poem that you feel you're feeling, it is a freeing, lovely experience."



"We're all so stressed out. We're so confused, so lonely. Poetry is an incredible form of solace, says Charly Cox, left. Charly Cox"

Rupi Kaur, far left, and Emma Wright, below, are leading the new wave of women poets. Laura Aziz: Tony Grant/The British Library



Cox, 23, leapt into the list of top 10 bestselling poets last year with *She Must Be Mad*, her debut collection of poems about her journey from girl to woman. Like Rupi Kaur, the 26-year-old Canadian-Punjabi who dominated the bestsellers last year, Cox first began publishing on Instagram. "A lot of the poets who are coming from online platforms are women or people of colour, and I think that has unsettled the very traditional, predominantly white, older male community, who have spent so long feeling that poetry is an incredibly exclusive academic club. Well, it's not any more. Suddenly, it's being blown open," she says.

Young women aged 13 to 24 are now the biggest consumers of poetry in the UK in a market that has grown by 48% over the past five years to £12.3m, according to UK book sales monitor Nielsen BookScan. But instead of buying works by the dead white men who have dominated the canon for centuries, young women are using their economic muscle to drive up sales of works by female poets, making poetry more diverse and representative than ever before.

Kaur, for example, made nearly £1m from poetry sales last year. Her themes include menstrual taboos, sexual violence and women's empowerment. Three other women – Pam Ayres, Helen Dunmore and Carol Ann Duffy, the UK's first ever female poet laureate – all netted sales into six-figures, something almost unheard of five years ago. Contemporary feminist poet Wendy Cope managed to sell almost as many volumes as perennial favourite Sylvia Plath.

This rise in the popularity of poetry by women corresponds with dramatic shifts in the demographics of poetry buyers. Five years ago, Nielsen's research suggests 27% of poetry buyers were young women and another 27% were middle-aged or elderly men. Today, nearly 40% of poetry buyers are women under 35 while just 18% are men over 34. The proportion of teenage boys and young men in their early 20s who purchase poetry has also increased, from 12% in 2014 to 16% today.

The ease with which poetry can be published online, read on mobile phones and shared on social media is one reason why the form has become more popular with teenagers and millennials, with young poets attracting millions of followers on Instagram.

This is opening up the market to younger and more diverse female voices, says Susannah Herbert, director of the Forward Arts Foundation, which runs the Forward Prizes for poetry and National Poetry Day: "For young women who don't necessarily feel they've got a massive right to the microphone, poetry offers a space to write and express yourself without crashing into an authority. Then other young women see something of themselves in those poems.

"Publishers have noticed there is an appetite for the writing of women and that if they ignore that appetite, they are not going to sell as many books. Young women working in publishing can also see what is popular online and say: this has a market."

Emma Wright, 33, was one of those women. She set up her own poetry publishing house, The Emma Press, at the age of 25 after noticing that all the big publishers and poetry magazines were run by men – and that certain styles of poetry were not being published. "And it wasn't because it wasn't good. It was just not represented. It wasn't in vogue. But the form, the subject matter and the style really resonated with me. I thought: who are the tastemakers? They did tend to be these older men," she says.

Poetry is far cheaper to edit and print than a novel; on a secondhand Mac, using inexpensive publishing software, Wright's first poetry pamphlet print run cost her just £1,000. She sells her books direct to readers online as well as in bookshops, and chooses only to publish works which personally interest her: "I'm doing this for a reason and it's obviously not the money. The payoff is that I publish poetry I want to read. That's why I started, why I carry on. That's what I'm bringing to the table."

As a British Asian, she is still working through her sense of identity: “That’s definitely my weak spot: what we learn from our parents, how we feel about ourselves.”

Her reputation is now well-established, and she is no longer unique: “In the small press scene, increasing numbers of women are setting up their own poetry publishing houses because there aren’t the economic barriers there used to be.”

This has coincided with a movement within poetry to expose aspects of women’s lives which they were previously expected to keep secret, Wright says: “There’s a sense of relief that you can talk about things like periods or pubic hair and share them and not get tarred and feathered.”

There has also been an increase in the number of poems that involve the female sexual gaze, says Herbert: “Young women have always wanted to read poetry – why do you think troubadours knocked off verses for their lady loves? But I think they haven’t always bought poetry because most published poetry has not been aimed at them. The great mass of love poetry over the centuries has been men looking at girls. Even just 10 years ago, you could pick up an anthology and struggle to find poems in which women look at men. Now we’re seeing a catch-up.”

At 17, Lucy Thynne was crowned Foyle Young Poet of the Year for the third year in a row in 2018 for

In the Nude. The poem describes how she and a female friend drove past a nudist resort, then stopped to secretly observe “an Adam... the whitened flesh,/ exposed, turning towards the sun/ as it wobbled like a pale dessert/ we would never order”.

She was inspired to start writing poetry by the female poets she was reading in her free time: “We only studied one female poet at school.”

Thynne likes Duffy, but works by contemporary young poets like Helen Mort, Caroline Bird, Sarah Howe and Rebecca Perry particularly struck a chord. “You read that you’re not alone, that what you’re going through is normal,” she says. It led her to think writing poetry was something she could do too: “Poetry as a form used to be so constrained by the straitjacket criteria of the dead white man. It was refreshing to hear so many female voices. That’s what I think is attracting so many female readers to poetry. It works together in tandem.”

And poetry, she says, is having a galvanising political effect on the women of her generation: “Poetry doesn’t just express ideas, it’s a vehicle for political messages. Post #MeToo and #TimesUp, we can look to female poets as militant figures.”

Older works have also enjoyed revivals. Black feminist writer Audre Lorde died in 1992 but *Your Silence*

Will Not Protect You, which brought together her prose and poetry for the first time, has sold more than 10,000 copies since its publication in October 2017.

“Lorde’s poetry – about survival, care, gendered and racist violence – speaks to young women whose bodies remain vulnerable, especially if they are of colour, and whose bodily autonomy is threatened by the global rightward shift,” says editor Sarah Shin.

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Emma Wright, poet