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## Instapoetry Matters

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# Contemporary Social Media and Creative Practice 2018

Hosted by  
the Social Media Narratives Class  
Art and Technology Studies  
School of the Art Institute of Chicago  
Facebook, November 1 - 6, 2018

## Transcript: Kathi Inman Berens



**Kathi Inman Berens**

November 1, 2018

### Instapoetry Matters

Why do fans of Instapoetry buy printed versions of exactly the same poems they can get in the Instagram app for free? Why buy what they already have?

The answer to this question wends through immigration offices and CreateSpace automated book publishing software, through an ocean of likes, reposts, hashtags and comments, and plants a flag onto bestseller lists with such unambiguous force that almost half (47 percent) of poetry books sold in the United States in 2017 were written by Instapoets. Here's the same awesome metric in different terms: twelve of 2017's top twenty bestselling poetry books—60%—were by Instapoets. In 2012, Instapoetry didn't exist. It is a publishing industry disruptor par excellence.

As an artform, Instapoetry lacks most of the attributes readers of print-based poetry associate with poems. Instapoetry is semantically simple. Some say it's banal, even opportunist, more like branded content than an artwork freestanding from a cult of personality. To what extent does the legacy of literary modernism influence what counts as "poetry" today? Is the "slow reading" necessitated by richly allusive, complex, text-only poetry an artifact of print culture? Modernist poetry resisted the ways technologies like automobiles, telegrams, typewriters, ticker tape, and cinema speeded up culture. What to make of poetry—Instagram and otherwise—in a faster age powered by inhumanly fast computers and byte-sized attention snacks?



**Judy Malloy** Welcome [Kathi Inman Berens](#)! Many good wishes for a great birthday celebration tomorrow!. When you return, SAIC student Amanda Heldenbrand will be your student guide on Facebook.

Like · Reply · 10w · Edited



**Judy Malloy** And here is [Kathi Inman Berens](#) ' bio:

## Kathi Inman Berens - Instagram Poetry



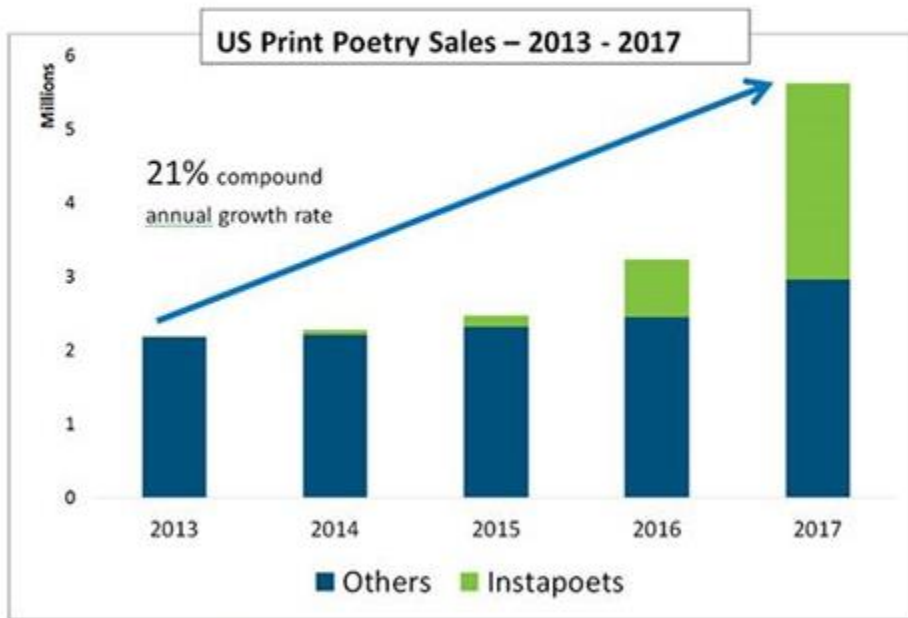
**K**athi Inman Berens, Assistant Professor at Portland State University's English Department, works on digital-born literature, contemporary book history, and digital contexts of book publishing. A longtime scholar and artist in the electronic literature community, Kathi joined Portland State University's book publishing faculty in 2015 after completing a Fulbright in Digital Culture at the University of Bergen, Norway. Kathi's current scholarship examines the digital bibliographic conditions of 21st-century books, including creative amateurism in Instapoetry, and metadata of children's picture books depicting nonwhite kids and families.



**Kathi Inman Berens**

November 1, 2018

60% of the 2017 poetry bestsellers in the US were Instapoetry!



Source: The NPD Group | NPD BookScan, 2017



**Kate Pritchard** Hello and welcome Kathi!



**Judy Malloy** Hi Kathi Inman Berens

I'm not familiar with the Instagram poetry environment, but in another class (not at SAIC), several students wanted to improve their writing and proposed projects writing in fan fiction communities. Their rationale was how supportive these communities were and how they encouraged writing. When I reviewed their projects -- I had to join two fan fiction communities to grade these projects -- I noted that there was not a single constructive comment in response to the work. All the comments --and there were quite a few -- were on the order of "awesome" "I love this!" "You rock!" "great writing" etc.

It was clear why my students liked these supportive communities, but the work they were creating was in great need of constructive criticism. In both cases, these students were visual artists who were among my best students as regards what they were creating with images and imagination, so I emerged from my sojourn in fan fiction communities with some concern

Is the Instagram poetry community like this? And as a onetime professor of creative writing, do you have any thoughts about this, as regards the work that comes out of these communities?



**Sora Del Rey** Hi Kathi. I had no idea that so much of poetry books were automated. I am interested in what insta poetry looks like. Would you mind directing us to some examples.

Like · Reply · 2w



**Kathi Inman Berens** Sora Del Rey: check out Tyler Knott Gregson and others, below.

Like · Reply · 1w · Edited



1



**Kathi Inman Berens** <https://www.instagram.com/tylerknott/>



INSTAGRAM

**Tyler Knott Gregson (@tylerknott) • Instagram photos and videos**



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**Kathi Inman Berens** [https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/)



INSTAGRAM

**rupi kaur (@rupikaur\_) • Instagram photos and videos**



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1



**Kathi Inman Berens** <https://www.instagram.com/rmdrk/> ...



INSTAGRAM

**R. M. Drake (@rmdrk) • Instagram photos and videos**



Like · Reply · Remove Preview · 1w



**Kathi Inman Berens** <https://www.teenvogue.com/gallery/best-poets-on-instagram...>



TEENVOGUE.COM

**10 Poets You Should Follow on Instagram Right Now**



Like · Reply · Remove Preview · 1w



**Kathi Inman Berens** Judy, the tonal content of community comments varies from poet to poet. Rupi Kaur, the best known of Instapoets (see her interviewed on Jimmy Fallon! How many poets on late night TV?) is supported by a community that draws strength from her subject matter (overcoming sexual violence, feminism). Sometimes writers use it as a springboard to draw people to their own work. I'm attaching a different kind of opportunism here, posted to RM Drake's poem from 2 days ago, that embeds an ad for credit repair. More to YOUR point, these are not communities of writers working craft the way we would typically think of it in a writing workshop. Often, the comments are a space where readers bring the poem to a friend or lover's attention -- as you'll also see in the Drake screengrab below.

I fall in love with the paint not the painting. with the people not the places. with the religion not the church and with the flowers not the garden. the same way I fall in love with her soul, not her body. with her touch and not her skin. with her smile and not her lips. it is the things that make her who she is that make me fall more in love.

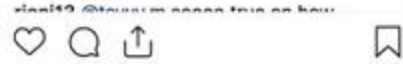
r. m. drake



rmdrk • Following

VIEW ON THE INSTAGRAM

- smootherthan\_life @aimyy\_
- jackielove88188 One of your best for sure
- petecostas How many hard inquiries do you have?
- Credit Repair Content coming soon! I just genuinely like helping people better their lives
- DM ME WITH CREDIT QUESTIONS FREE CONTENT NO GIMMICKS Follow, Like, and Comment Tag your friends to get them on board.
- maaaariaaaaa @manuelasantosa\_
- aimyy\_ @smootherthan\_life
- babbbyyyy



18,488 likes



**Judy Malloy** Thanks Kathi

As you have pointed out, there has been media coverage of the interest in poetry that Instapoetry has engendered, and I have even seen it lauded as an antidote to academic MFA-fostered poetry. OK, the vitality of this community is of interest. And I strongly support the work that you are doing to look at this work through a literary scholar and electronic poet's lens.

From my point of view -- emerging from the undercurrents of discord between contemporary creative writing and electronic literature -- what concerns me is that when Instapoetry is imagined inside a greeting card, it becomes clear what most if it is.

In contrast, Sora Del Rey, one of my students, is creating "Akit - Neh - Yo - I" which with gridded poetry introduces an electronic literature interface into Instagram's rigid constraints. Text runs innovatively across columns, and the work is strengthened not only by divulging historical information from the era of foreign conquest in Mexico, but also by personal narratives, as -- in Papantla Totonac, the language his grandmother spoke -- with text and poetry Sora reclaims lost heritage.

(edited by JM on 1/24/19)