

## Podcast Interview mit Thom Young

Alexandra Kemmerer (AK): Moderne Medien verändern unsere Text- und Kommunikationskultur. Aber was passiert mit Literatur, wenn sie gescrollt statt geblättert wird? Liebe Lehrkräfte, Sie hören jetzt ein kurzes Interview mit Thom Young, einem Englischlehrer aus Texas, Buchautor und außerdem einem der bekanntesten Vertreter von Instapoetry, also Lyrik auf Social Media. Wir werden darüber sprechen, was Gedichte im digitalen Raum ausmacht und was er daran kritisch sieht. Wie verändert sich ein Gedicht, wenn es sich im Feed statt im Buch entfaltet? Was verlieren wir, wenn Lyrik auf Nutzungsverhalten und Algorithmen optimiert wird? Und wie können Lehrkräfte Instapoetry ernst nehmen ohne dabei den kritischen Blick außer Acht zu lassen? Das und vieles mehr hören Sie nun in einem Gespräch über Poesie und Plattformen, über Likes und Literatur – und darüber, was bleibt, wenn sich die Form ändert.

[Musik]

AK: Well, hello, Tom, and thank you for joining us today. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself before we start?

Thom Young (TY): Sure. Well, I'm a native Texan, grew up kind of with an athletic background. My dad was a football coach in college and high school in Texas. And we're talking American football, not soccer, as you all call it over there. But my family is currently actually from New Braunfels, which I believe means little Germany, maybe. It's in the hill country of Texas. So, I kind of grew up moving around Texas with that background. I always liked to write, especially kind of started in junior high, doing stories and kind of trade with friends. Yeah. And then I kind of had a traumatic brain injury at 13 and basically a stroke, which was really rare. And then once I recovered from that, luckily I was young, was able to recover. But I found like a new kind of burst of creativity. I did some research. And so I've been able to write anything since then, basically off the top of my head, especially satire, which I think I'm really good at. In fact, it's probably what I do best, I would consider.

AK: And you do that satire a lot on Instagram, and we will explore that in a minute. The point is, of course, why we're talking together today is because you're known to be an Insta poet. Can you tell our audience a little bit about what Instapoetry is?

TY: I think it came, you know, kind of with the advent of the social media. I was writing way before social media and was published primarily in literary, you know, academic journals

or magazines. But that's kind of shifted with the advent of social media. And Instapoetry basically is kind of short, trite. I don't know if you, in my opinion, call it poetry, but I think a lot of people like it because it's so accessible. And, you know, that's kind of the medium itself. They see something, they like it, they relate to it, they, you know, then scroll on. And, you know, that's what works on that medium, which is good. I think it's kind of become its own, I don't know, genre. But, you know, it certainly is very popular. But that's people just posting their poetry or whatever you want to call it on there. And, yeah, it's become popular. You get a lot of followers. What I did basically is I had Instagram, but I never put my writing. But then I looked around. I was like, oh, this is like this is what works. So I did a satire of it. I tried to post the most simplistic type of poems on there. And like, sure enough, I gained like tons of followers. So it's just what works on there. And obviously it's become pretty big, I guess, in that sense. But I was really just kind of doing satire with it. And it definitely works. And a lot of people knew that, but not a whole lot of people. So it was fun. I also used it to write my novel, which I think I sent you, Insta poet. So that novel explains it. That's kind of why I did it, to just get an idea for that.

AK: So your experience as an Insta poet inspired you to write this also rather satirical novel, right?

TY: Yes. That's pretty much why I did it. I had the idea for the novel for a while, but actually I got ideas from this. And that's in the book. And then I actually wrote with another writer. So that was kind of new for me. I would do a part. Then he would do a part. So, I think it worked out really good. I'm very proud of it. I think it's – I wish it would sell more. I think I actually sell more in Europe. I don't know what that is. Maybe you all are smarter readers over there. So, it's kind of an experiment, which kind of took on the *PBS NewsHour*. I kind of approached them and that kind of took off after that article. So, I've been in all these articles about this. And I think it's really popular because you always see articles about Instapoetry like every month. There's always something about it.

AK: But that's rarely an article that actually approaches Instapoetry from a critical point of view, I think. Actually, I read one of these articles on PBS about you. And that is what sparked my interest because you came up with the term pop poetry for Instapoetry as well. Could you explore a bit what you mean by that? I think you even called it fidget spinner poetry, didn't you?

TY: Yes. In fact, I have a good friend who's an excellent writer, Scott LaDotte. To me, he's like the best poet right now in America. We kind of met through that as well. But yeah, it's just popular is what it came from. And the attention spans, people aren't really going to Instagram to read something that's more in-depth or critical. And that's fine. That's what works there. I see that with my students. They're just a different generation. They're digital. That's what they want to do. And the attention spans, even with students, but also adults. I think I did a workshop a couple of summers ago for our professional development. They said the average attention span's about eight seconds. So I don't know if that's true, but that was backed up with research, according to the speaker there. So that's just kind of our instant society. I think that's why it works. Everybody's on their phones. The kids want to be on the phone all the time. So, you kind of have to integrate that into teaching. Although Texas is, I think, trying to pass a bill to only allow students to get on their phones at certain times, which I think would help teachers out quite a bit. But you, I mean, might as well use it. It's not like it's going to go away.

AK: Right. It's not going to go away. So, what would be your proposal to, for example, approach Instapoetry with your students? Have you ever tried that?

TY: Yes. What I like to do, like when we do poetry is, I mean, we have a curriculum and a book. So, we do a lot of the we do American literature. So, a lot of the older type poets, you know, and sometimes I'll take a poem from them and then compare it with like an insta poem, put them side by side. And then I'll see what the students think about it. And then we'll look at how more, you know, the more in-depth point, like if you are doing William Blake. I usually do the *Garden of Love*. I don't know if you're familiar with that poem. But then you compare that to like an Insta poem and you've got all this figurative language in the actual Blake poem. And then you look at Instapoetry. It's not to, you know, say anything. It's more to get the students to be critical and look at it. So, oh, this has got a little more symbolism. You can interpret this a different way or, you know, like terminology calls it hermeneutic. But with Instapoetry, it's just kind of instant. It's like, yeah, I relate to it. You know, that's good. And a lot of the students like that, especially the girls. Rupi Kaur, if you know her, they love her books, which is fine. As long as they're reading, you know, I'm not going to hate on that. If I can get them to read a book, then I feel like I've done my job on that aspect. So now whether that's really critical, in my opinion, not really. But that's fine. As long as they're reading, maybe it'll open up to more in-depth work. I think literature is kind of becoming a lost art in some

ways with students. Not all, but just because of the attention spans, you have to use more digital media, something they can relate to. And even Texas, like with standardized tests, has gone to shorter texts. It used to be longer, more in-depth, you know, more critical passages. Now it's very short. Most of it is nonfiction. It's just, you know, they're looking for just short responses. They don't really, they've gotten away from the essays, which I don't know what that says. But that's just kind of the way it's become. And they've gone to AI stuff, too. I think Texas has a school which is completely AI, which they spend half the day doing that. And then the rest of the time doing real-world problems, which I think is good, because those are good skills students need to know, you know, considering what's happened the last few years or so.

AK: Speaking about skills students need to know, you kind of said between the lines that you wish for them to be more critical and to approach topics more critically. How could you achieve that from your point of view? Or is that something that you try to do by being satirical?

TY: Not in the classroom. I mean, satire, I think we, I do teach that. But it's very difficult to teach satire, I think, because basically, at least in American society, satires become reality almost. And it's hard to tell what the difference is. But as far as like getting them to think, I usually I don't want them to focus so much on the plot, especially if we're doing like a short story. That's I mean, they can pretty much tell you the plot, but I want them to look beyond like at the themes, the symbolism, the motifs, and just really to think more critically. And if they can do that and they can write about it, I usually teach a lot of that kind of deeper stuff first and get them thinking before we actually read it. And I use a couple of good programs that are free. One is *CommonLit*, where they have everything for free. It's got questions and it's really good for the students. So, I use that for like my tests or quizzes and it grades it automatically, which makes it easier because we usually have to grade quite a bit. So, and I think they like that more just, you know, if you say, oh, read this novel. They're like, oh, I don't want to read this. But if you kind of go through each part and then I don't want to say just summarize it. But, you know, the texts are more digital. They interact with that. That's just kind of their mentality, I guess. I think that's just a reflection of technology we have today. And they're all about that. So, we try to make it interesting for them.

AK: Actually, I've heard the term in Germany quite a few times. They talk about snackable content.

TY: Yes, I think that's kind of you could say that about Instapoetry. Well, even I do post some of my real poetry on there, but it usually doesn't get as many views or likes. If you put something short and more universal, you're going to get those likes and views just because that's what the platform is. It's not a platform that people usually seek out to read a lot, although I think I don't have TikTok. But I know books have become popular maybe because they're going viral, not necessarily that people are seeking out great literature. So, I think that's changed. You know, it's all about going viral. A lot of big publishers look for, oh, how many followers do they have? Are they getting the views? Are they getting the likes? I think we could put a book out and maybe sell this. I think that's kind of what happened with Instapoetry. A lot of these, if you want to call them poets, they got really popular and they got these book deals. And, yeah, they've sold a lot of books. So, I mean, that's probably a reflection of just going viral and being popular. I think a lot of these books have outsold like Homer, you know, which I don't know what that says about society. But, yeah, it's very popular. And that's kind of the way the days of getting a literary agent, you know, that's kind of in the past almost. And that can be a good thing. But it's all about going viral pretty much or followers. You know, a lot of the writers that came in before that were already established, if that kind of makes sense. And then now it's like, well, you're popular online, social media. You've got to be on there. I think that's kind of what shifted in publishing. I'm not saying always, but I've seen that just from my own writing.

AK: You said, if you want to call them poets. So let me ask a provocative question. I've also read that, of course, some people criticize that Instapoetry is, of course, algorithm driven, as you described, and often commercialized for social media. So it's short, easy, emotionally punchy. And that raises concerns about artistic depth and authenticity. So does it mean that Instapoetry is not literature?

TY: I mean, it depends on what you define as literature. Is it in-depth, critical literature, like reading a novel or analyzing it? No. Is it kind of its own genre, in my opinion? Sure. It's like, you know, a *Hallmark card* or just, you know, something feel good. So it's kind of its own thing. I don't think you can really say it's more of a critical type of literature. It's not like you're reading an in-depth novel with a lot of symbolism and you're trying to figure out what the author is saying. You can go back and look for, you know, motifs or themes. You're not really doing that with Instapoetry. You just have something short, trite. Yeah, it's real popular. It's a

good dopamine hit. People relate to it. So, yeah, I think it's kind of its own thing. And that's not necessarily bad. But in my opinion, I don't think it's real in-depth thinking, you know.

AK: I think one of the Insta poems I read from you, and I think it is satirical, was a poem where you just wrote: "Wait." What does it feel like for you when people actually relate to that and do not get the hint that this is satire? And I mean, it's even in your bio on Instagram.

TY: That's really good satire when people can't tell the difference. And I think with that medium, that's what it is. So people don't necessarily think like, oh, this is satire or he's making fun of it. It is what it is, which is fine. I've probably got a lot of new readers from that, and maybe they've read some of my books. But I think definitely on Instagram, satire is difficult to determine, like I said, basically. And at least American society has become satirical. But, yeah, it's kind of – I like it because it does invoke thinking. But obviously with Instagram, yeah, a lot of people probably didn't get it. There's been articles about that. Some people got upset about it, and they thought, oh, he's making fun, he's criticizing. I was really just trying to show that, yeah, it is what it is. If you want to become popular on there, this is what you can do. And, yeah, I was kind of making fun of it as well. But that's kind of satire in general. If you're not offending a little bit or making fun of, what's the point? We're almost at the point now where you can't really say anything without somebody getting upset or offended.

AK: That raises the question for me whether, and if so how, we should talk to students about the dynamics of likes, algorithms, and also the whole power dynamics that are behind this.

TY: Yeah, they are digital, and they like that, and that's kind of where they're geared. But I've also found that students like to write on paper sometimes too. I do a lot of creative writing stuff where I'll give them a prompt. It might relate to what we're doing, or it might just be a random prompt, and then I'll say, okay, write the rest of it after that, and then you'll write five minutes, then switch with a partner and have them add on to what you put. That's one of the favorite things they like to do. So I think a lot of it's maybe because they didn't grow up doing that, so it's something different. They do like to write on paper. But, yeah, they're definitely more inclined, and I'm always like I'm all about letting people make their own choices. I think that at least for students, you need to teach them to think critically, especially with literature, because that's going to benefit them when they get out in the real world, out of high school where you have to deal with just life. I always say, well, you don't always know the answer sometimes. Sometimes you just take a step back and you think about

it, maybe analyze it a little bit. I think that's an important skill to have, and I think really even higher education is not really as vital as it used to be with the advent of this technology. There's a lot of young people that make a ton of money from being influencers or whatever. It might depend on what you want to study or degree, but I think when I was in college, maybe it was a little more, you know, a college degree was important. I don't know if that's necessarily true today. What are your thoughts on that?

AK: Well, I'd say that it's hard today to get along without being digitally competent. Let's put it that way.

TY: Right.

AK: And I also think that for our students, even if they don't want to necessarily become an influencer or live from being online, they do live online as well. And they are also part of the conversations that happen online when they, for example, react to an Insta poem of yours. And that means that, of course, they are also subject to the algorithm, to the dynamics that are happening online. They can be subject to shit storms and reactions to that. And you need to be competent in navigating all the online communication as well. And I think this is actually quite challenging compared to the kind of conversations that we possibly had in our youth in very small groups of people.

TY: Yeah. And I think we have great counseling at our school, and that's really become a mental health issue, I think, with a lot of students is, yeah, they will comment or they're bullying somebody. I mean, that wasn't really the case when obviously I was in school. We didn't have all this. But that's a big issue. And I think mental health is a big thing because of this. And I don't think it's necessarily like really positive all the time. So, I think that's help that people are aware of that. And I think our school does a good job of addressing that because that's become more common, unfortunately, that they do live online. And it's hard for them to separate their perception versus reality. The way AI is now, it's hard to even tell what's real. I think it's gotten so advanced where they have these videos. You can't tell unless you're really looking at it. It's probably only going to get more advanced. So I don't know what that's opened up a Pandora's box, maybe.

AK: What would be something that you wish more teachers understood about young people's digital reading and writing habits?

TY: I think the main thing with teenagers is sometimes we're quick to implement or talk too much. I've found most of these students will just listen. If I have a student, if they get

upset or something, they just want somebody to listen to them. I think that's just being a teenager. So I think if you start with that approach, kind of maybe ask them, oh, what do you think about this? Or you can get into issues or what do you all like? Do you prefer this? Or we'll try something. You have to constantly kind of mix digital with doing some other activities. I still do tons of foldables for our stories. And the kids, they like that. They'll take notes. I do Cornell Notes a lot. They can either write them down or they can type them. They'll still take notes and I'll take a grade or whatever. But, yeah, I think you have to find a balance just with the way the technology is. You can have too much of it. But at the same time, you have to realize that's probably where most of these kids are coming from because they are constantly on the phone. It's just that's just the way this generation is. So, finding a balance and really just having, you know, guidelines as well with whatever curriculum they're teaching. I don't know. We have certain things we have to do. But, yeah, you need to be open to like just be flexible. And just, you know, teaching is, I don't know if it's unfortunately, it's a lot more than teaching. It's almost counseling. You're dealing with, you know, I teach English as second language, too. So there's always issues, you know, outside of school. You don't know what the students are dealing with. They may be coming into the class, which is the only safe place they can go is probably in school. Or maybe that's the only place they can eat. I mean, you just never know what you're dealing with. So, I think that's why they have a hard time getting teachers, especially in Texas. So, they're trying to do some more incentives to try to get more people into the teaching field. So, it's just something that you really have to want to do, because I've had friends in the corporate world. They're like, oh, man, you guys get summer off and, you know, nice breaks. I'm like, yeah, well go in there and try it and see how easy it is. They've tried it. They lasted maybe a semester. They're like, oh, man, I don't know how y'all do this. So it isn't easy. So you definitely just have to be flexible, in my opinion.

AK: Even though we are a few miles apart from Texas, we have very similar conversations over here. So it's even up to the holiday part. We do have the same conversations, give the same answers, such as: "Please try it."

TY: Right.

AK: But of course, there is a reason why we do it and why we enjoy supporting our students. So let's finish this talk on a positive note. There are aspects to, for example, Instapoetry or digital communication in general that rather speak for a short attention span

that can be concerning. On the other hand, as far as I know, you've been doing Instapoetry for almost a decade now, right?

TY: Yes.

AK: So there must be something about it that keeps you going and that keeps you interested.

TY: Well, I think it's just a good creative outlet. You know, like I said, I put my real poetry on there as well. And I think it's just kind of the way it is. I mean, the medium is not going to go away. This technology is not going to go away. So you can't, the days of like submitting to journals and like getting recognition, that's, you know, that's probably not going to happen. I think that's really important. I still do that. But you got to be, you know, that's just where it is. That's just the way societies become. And plus, it's a good place to practice satire. It's really easy for me because I can write pretty much anything off the top of my head. So, yeah. And plus, I've met like some really interesting people and other writers. So, like I said, I met my friend Scott and he was a writer. So, yeah, it's a good way to connect. So, you know, social media is not always a bad thing, even though it is probably, ironically, making people more antisocial. But you still can make a connection. And I think there's a social aspect to it as well. So that's just kind of where it is. You know, times have changed, I guess.

AK: Being online and sharing your poetry is something that connects people. It is kind of a digital playground. But it's also, and you've mentioned it quite a few times, kind of a, let's say, gateway poetry.

TY: Yeah. Well, I've read that. That's been in some of the articles, I think, with some of the other Insta poets. The bigger names, I guess, they've said that. Well, it may act as a gateway to more in-depth literature, which I think is great. But I don't know if there's been a study done with that. I don't know if a lot of people necessarily want to go there. But I think if it does, then that's a good thing. It may depend on the person. I think we've become very spoiled with instant gratification. So patience is another thing you need to have. As a teacher, I think that's a good quality I have.

AK: Well, in that case, I'd say thank you for your patience with me and all the questions that I had about Instapoetry. And thank you for sharing your thoughts with our English teachers. We're going to listen to the podcast and hopefully also get a bit curious about Instapoetry and the, let's say, advantages and disadvantages and the possible connections that we can make online. Thank you so much, Tom.

TY: Yeah, thanks for getting in contact. I appreciate it.