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## GR8! Poetry's in motion on Virginia vanity plates

The Virginian-Pilot

EARLIER THIS WEEK it was announced, not surprisingly, that Virginia has the highest percentage of vanity plates in the country. About one in six Virginians show off their creativity on their bumpers. GR8.

What surprised me about the announcement was the praise the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators had for those who choose vanity plates.

"Vanity plates are minimalist poetry in motion. Vanity plates are powerful message platforms that allow motorists to tell compelling or funny stories in eight or fewer characters. And vanity plates are fun," said author Stefan Lonce, who is writing a book about vanity plates called "LCNS2ROM – License to Roam," and who helped conduct the 50-state survey with the Motor Vehicle Administrators. (Virginians get six characters, plus a dash or space.)

Fun, sure. Something to distract me during long holiday road trips, of course. Helpful to nonprofits that get a cut of the proceeds from plates devoted to their causes, no doubt.

But characterizing the more than a million Virginians with vanity plates as poets – aspiring Robert Frosts driving around, laying out how fences make good neighbors in six characters or less – seems far-fetched. (FNCNBR)

To speak plainly and plately, THATS BS (an actual Virginia plate, according to a Washington Post blog entry Wednesday).

I like offbeat haikus. I'll listen to spoken word now and then. I even went along with the magnetic refrigerator poetry craze that subjected people to sentences like "early-morning tickles taste like toilet bowl roses" any time they wanted a beer.

Vanity license plates, I am convinced, are not poetry. Six characters is one pretty good turn in Scrabble, not the work of Charles Bukowski. It's not even enough for a dirty limerick.

But what do I know?

I called Carolyn Kreiter-Foronda, Virginia's poet laureate. She was in Norfolk twice this month spreading the word of the laureate-ness. Kreiter-Foronda is the author of four books and travels the state giving poetry workshops.

I asked her if indeed license plates were "minimalist poetry in motion."

She likened license plates to poems – puzzles to create and decipher.

When I mentioned a couple of boring, predictable license plates I had seen, she defended them. Poets choose their words carefully, assigning meaning to almost every syllable. But that meaning is also open to interpretation from readers.

Just like the relationship between a reader and a poet, so goes the relationship between a driver and a vanity plate holder. It's there for us to take from it what we want.

Picking a plate, "It's trying to come up with an enigma and express it succinctly," she told me.

Clearly, I was not getting through that poetry is in books and on cheesy motivational posters, not plates.

I asked about Kreiter-Foronda's own cars.

Her husband, a massage therapist, has a plate that reads MASS THER. A third vehicle is named for their cat, PICATSO.

Her own plate: VA POET. Don't worry, it's not a massive ego trip; she had it long before she was actually Virginia's poet laureate. It's just especially apt now.

Someone as simple-minded as myself needs a few more characters to get a point across.

Roses are red/Violets are blue/A bad vanity plate is like a bad tattoo/It's not poetry either

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