

Pia de Jong Warms Up a Cold March Monday With Observations on Dutch and American Life



NOTES IN A BOTTLE: Relative newcomer to Princeton

Pia de Jong shared her observations on life in the United States with longtime resident Landon "Lanny" Jones in front of an audience at the Princeton Public Library Monday, March 2. The Dutch novelist and columnist read from her popular weekly column for the Amsterdam daily *NRC Handelsblad*. Mr. Jones, former *People Magazine* editor, moderated the event which was part of the Library's "Conversations that Matter" series, currently focused on immigration. For more on the writer, visit: www.piadejong.com. For more information about library programs and services, call (609) 924-9529 or visit: www.princetonlibrary.org.

(Photo by L. Arntzenius)

In spite of icy conditions on a cold March Monday, the Community Room at the Princeton Public Library was filled to capacity when Dutch novelist and columnist Pia de Jong presented a selection of the popular weekly column she writes about life in Princeton for the Amsterdam daily *NRC Handelsblad*.

Ms. de Jong is well known as a novelist in The Netherlands and it surely won't be long before she's known more widely in the States as well. A hundred of her columns have already been compiled into book form by the Dutch publisher Prometheus under the title *Flessenpost (Notes in a Bottle)*; she's working to translate her novels from Dutch into English and is writing a memoir.

Landon Jones, former *People Magazine* editor and longtime Princeton resident, served as Ms. de Jong's interviewer, Monday, March 2, putting questions to her, inviting her to read from her work and soliciting questions from the audience. The event was part of the Library's "Conversations that Matter" series, currently focused on immigration.

"Who better to speak about the immigration experience than Pia," said Mr. Jones. "Soon after she arrived in Princeton from Amsterdam, where she had established herself as a rising star, she began writing on people, places, and the human comedy, as well as the experience of writing in the foreign language of English."

Since her first column, written during her first week in Princeton, Ms. de Jong has produced 126 consecutive articles in as many weeks. Clearly she hit the ground running and hasn't stopped since. Ms. de Jong's writings are far from hurried outpourings, however. They are full of insight and witty observation. They are just as informative and entertaining to U.S. as to Dutch readers as Monday's audience discovered in a booklet sampling *Notes in a Bottle* that was made available for free, or for a donation to the Princeton Public Library.

Illustrated with delightful cartoons by Eliane Gerrits, some of them very funny indeed, Ms. de Jong's subjects range from her arrival in Princeton to differences between American and European life, and contemporary politics, manners, and mores.

"She's written about Freeman Dyson and the lady she met while waiting in line at the CVS pharmacy; Dutch bread gets a thumbs up; American cheese gets a thumbs down," commented Mr. Jones. "When Pia had a fall on black ice that resulted in a hospital visit, it led to a column on domestic abuse."

Describing Ms. de Jong as a late-bloomer who had two careers and three children before turning to writing, Mr. Jones placed her in the tradition other Europeans who have come to the United States and held a mirror up to its culture, traditions, mores, and foibles. "Alexis de Tocqueville and Alistair Cooke spring to mind," said Mr. Jones, author of *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* and himself a keen observer of national, social, and cultural issues.

A photogenic and engaging speaker with a broad and welcoming smile, Ms. de Jong came to Princeton in 2012 when her husband Robbert Dijkgraaf became director of the Institute for Advanced Study. The couple took up residence with their three children in the director's residence, Olden Farm. Mr. Dijkgraaf also writes a regular column for the scientific supplement of *NCR Handelsblad*.

Olden Farm's rural setting is a far cry from Amsterdam where the couple lived in one of the city's most famous houses, a tall narrow 17th-century edifice on a canal, where the children were born and where de Jong began her writing career.

"A weekly columnist needs to be good company and that is Pia," said Mr. Jones, adding that she is also "self-deprecating and funny."

Of her first column written in response to Superstorm Sandy, which took her by surprise, she said: "I was totally scared and wondered why I had left my safe country and my nice safe brick home for a wooden one. I had signed up for a new experience but I didn't sign up to die here," she laughed, as she

recalled the morning after the storm as strangely quiet. Observing a fallen tree, she felt just as uprooted, homesick. The piece she wrote in response to the storm was published in The Washington Post. With it, she found her American audience. "We all feel a little bit uprooted," she said, acknowledging the immigrant nature of Americans who hail from all over the world.

Where did she get her ideas, asked Mr. Jones. "I never went looking for subjects but I paid attention to everyday things. Writing the weekly column made me look at things and be in this new country and pay attention; paying attention is the basis of writing; writers have an eye for detail," she replied.

Wearing her signature colors of red and black, Ms. de Jong appeared relaxed and confident as she read several of her short pieces in their entirety. "Pieter and Bill," described a character from the streets of Amsterdam and Princeton's own Bill Rieszer, a familiar presence in downtown Princeton where he is known to many as Billy, the man who regularly sweeps the storefronts along Nassau Street.

Prompted by questions from the audience, the writer discussed differences between The Netherlands and the United States such as Amsterdam "coffee shops" that sell drugs and the city's Red Light district. "The Dutch are more cynical and Americans are more naive; there is more tolerance for people who are different in the United States," she said with characteristic forthrightness.

Ms. de Jong's 2008 debut novel, *Lange Dagen (Long Days)*, received the Golden Owl Literature Readers Prize; her second, *Dieptevrees (Fear of Depth)*, published in 2010, was praised for its strong, elegant prose. Both have yet to be translated into English. She has published two books for children and has won many awards for her short stories.

For more than a decade, Ms. de Jong resisted requests to write the story of her daughter Charlotte, who was born with myeloid leukemia and was not expected to live. Charlotte is now a lively teen attending John Witherspoon Middle School. Ms. de Jong concluded her readings Monday with a moving excerpt from the memoir she is working on about that experience, which she has described as "life-changing."

For more on the writer, visit: www.piadejong.com. For more information about library programs and services, call (609) 924-9529 or visit: www.princetonlibrary.org.

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