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Current Issue



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The Dutch Novelist Pia De Jong Calls Princeton Home

*By Linda Arntzenius**Photography by Benoit Cortet**Illustrations by Elaine Gerrits*

Regular readers of Princeton Magazine will recognize Pia de Jong from a feature story that ran in 2013 shortly after the Dutch novelist and her family moved from Amsterdam to Princeton for her husband Robbert Dijkgraaf to take up his appointment as director of the Institute for Advanced Study. The focus of that first article was Robbert Dijkgraaf. This time around, it's all Pia.

Interviewed then, de Jong described plans to write in English and to work on a memoir of the year when her daughter was born. Now a healthy teen, Charlotte had myeloid leukemia and was not expected to survive infancy. Not only has de Jong held true to her promise, she's developed in new and unexpected directions, most significantly as an interpreter of the American way of life for Dutch readers of her weekly column, *Flessenpost (Notes in a Bottle)* for the Amsterdam daily newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad*.

If her column's title suggests a castaway of sorts, that's entirely appropriate. Feeling uprooted was the subject of one of de Jong's first Princeton columns, in response to Superstorm Sandy. "I am a wife who traveled to a new country with my husband because of his job; it's especially common in academia," she tells me. "Some friends in Amsterdam wondered whether this was a wise move. I left my life behind for something unknown and new that had me wondering, where is Pia in all of this?" Uprooted-ness is an undercurrent in her work, one familiar to other émigré writers like Colm Tóibín and André Aciman.



De Jong observes people and places and discovers aspects of the human comedy. Her subjects range from arriving in Princeton, differences between American and European life, observations on contemporary politics, political correctness, manners, mores and reflections on American individualism versus the Dutch focus on the common good. She's written about Freeman Dyson; Lady Gaga; Jim McCloskey's work in freeing innocent prisoners; an unnamed lady having difficulty paying for her prescription at the CVS pharmacy on Nassau Street; American dentistry; Martians landing at Grover's Mill courtesy of Orson Welles; *Mad Men*; American festivities like Halloween and Norman Rockwell-style Christmas; Woody Allen's visit to Princeton; even training a new puppy. She's a keen interpreter of class and social convention.

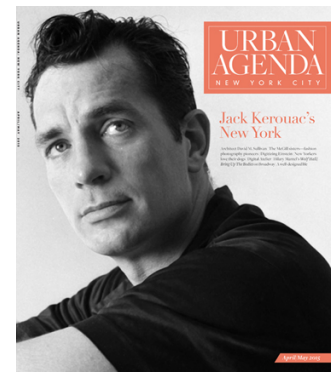
"The Dutch are always criticizing the United States and I hope to explain the different mentalities on both sides of the Atlantic," she says. Although she can also be critical of what she sees, her reactions are so honest and authentic that it becomes impossible for any reader to feel alienated. On the contrary, she's found that since America is a country of immigrants, her work resonates with readers.

Asked whether she's concerned about developing a persona in her columns, de Jong looks puzzled. Clearly what you see is what you get with this writer. Her voice is her own, authentically positive, grounded, and healthy.

So far she's had just one column shot down. She'd written about the American habit of having indoor cats declawed and her Amsterdam editor feared being inundated with letters from animal rights activists. But as for self-censorship, there's no subject de Jong regards as taboo, although she draws the line when it comes to her children's privacy. "I'm not out to shock or expose and I don't want to offend anyone. It touches me deeply when people say appreciative things. When they get it, when it works, it's magic."



Urban Agenda Magazine



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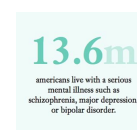
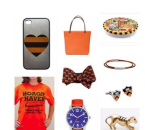
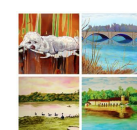
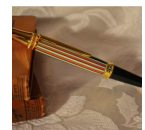
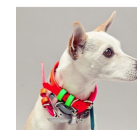
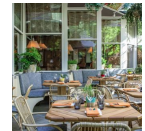
Princeton Family



February 2015



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Delightfully illustrated by the Dutch cartoonist Eliane Gerrits, the columns can be very funny, as when de Jong writes about missing fresh-baked Dutch bread and Dutch cheese. Cheese of the kind that can't readily be squeezed from a tube is "a threatened commodity" here, she has found. Her columns often kick off with some incident close to home and then spin out into the world at large, as when she falls on black ice on Super Bowl Sunday and ends up in the emergency room. The nurse's subtle questioning as to the causes of her bruises leads to a discourse on American football and domestic abuse, involving the halftime show "commercial" in which a 911 woman caller orders pizza and hopes that the dispatcher will be quick enough to register the real reason for her call. De Jong's writing can be poignant as in "Pieter and Bill," the former a familiar figure on the streets near her home in Amsterdam and the latter a recognizable character from Princeton's Nassau Street.

De Jong had been thinking of using her own photographs to accompany her pieces until her editor suggested an illustrator. It's a system that works well. The author sends Gerrits her column on Saturday night and a drawing is done by Sunday morning. Since her first *Flessenpost* in September 2012, de Jong has produced 130 straight columns in as many weeks.

"Pia's columns pack into 580 words an abundance of insight about Princeton and the people who live here; she is wise about the big issues and observant about the little things that happen in the nooks and crannies of life," says former *People Magazine* editor, Landon Jones, who has championed the newcomer, introducing her to "her tribe," as he puts it.

Shortly after de Jong arrived, Jones invited her to a book party he was hosting for Evan Thomas and his newly published biography, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World*. Since then, Jones has been something of a sounding board for de Jong as she finds her voice in the English language. "Women in particular warm to her," he says. "She's not only devoted to her family and very supportive of her husband, she's carving out her own way and women in particular relate to her personal take on things. If Pia can't find herself in the story she won't write about it."

"Lanny is equally as curious as I am," says de Jong, "he was the first person who seemed to care about my columns which he read in translation via Google and he suggested I blog for the Huffington Post."

Jones is well-placed to give advice. After leaving *People*, he served as Time Inc's Vice President for strategic planning until he retired in 2000. He's also the author of three books: *Great*

Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation (1980); *The Essential Lewis and Clark* (2000); and *William Clark and the Shaping of the West* (2004).

As Jones points out, de Jong is quickly finding an audience on this side of the Atlantic. “It’s astonishing the way she has established herself in English—her fourth language—less than 3 years since she arrived, writing in the Washington Post, Huffington Post, and now fiction in Wild River Review and Antioch Review. She is very inquisitive, an astute observer and a wonderful columnist.”

“She stands in a long tradition of European writers who have come to America and reported on what they find here,” says Jones, mentioning Alexis de Tocqueville and English writer Alistair Cooke’s beloved “Letter from America.” “A weekly columnist needs to be good company and Pia is,” he says. “Her writerly voice reminds me of Russell Baker and Joan Didion, full of irony and insight but also self-deprecating, and at times very funny. Not even Tocqueville or Baker took on Yoga Moms or Back-to-School Night, but Pia did.”

Born in the Netherlands in 1961, de Jong met Dijkgraaf when she was 18 and he 19. They fell in love quickly and lived together for ten years before getting married in order to simplify visa requirements when Dijkgraaf came to the States in 1991, for a year as a member of the Institute for Advanced Study. They now have three children, Jurriaan, 18, Matthijs, 16, and Charlotte, 14.


De Jong’s father was a hydraulic engineer, not an unusual profession for a Dutchman, she laughs, given the country is for the most part below sea level. Her homemaker mother raised three kids, Pia sandwiched between an older brother who now works for Royal Dutch Shell, and a younger brother, an engineer working in Tanzania.

She studied Dutch language and literature and trained as a psychologist. Dijkgraaf studied art and then went on to become a prominent mathematical physicist. The couple is readily recognized in the Netherlands where he appears regularly on television and she’s known as a leading voice in Dutch-language fiction.

Lauded for communicating science to the public and for cultivating the next generation of young scientists, Dijkgraaf, as President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of the Arts and Sciences, brought scholars from a wide variety of disciplines together on important scientific and public policy issues such as climate change. He too writes a column, albeit monthly, in the *NRC Handelsblad*.



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BECOMING A WRITER

Before coming to Princeton, de Jong had already earned a reputation as an emerging literary star, having written two prize-winning novels and two books for children. She began writing seriously after her daughter, who was born in 2000, became well. Charlotte was covered in tumors and the oncologist told the couple to prepare themselves. “This baby is going to die, he told us. It was a very stressful and strange event. I started to pack my bags and the oncologist said ‘What are you doing?’ Charlotte was just two weeks old. We had to sign a lot of papers but we took her home,” recalls de Jong.

“I was a mother animal, breast-feeding, sleeping with my children, my external career was absent, Robbert helped me to keep out the external world, he was amazing, he cooked, he did what needed to be done in the home, he never questioned my intuition. We bonded tightly as a family at this time and, interestingly enough, Robbert did his best scientific work during this period. It’s an incredible story, telling it so briefly makes it sound easy but it was a very difficult time, especially as we didn’t know what the outcome would be. We expected Charlotte might die. We prepared for it. I quit my job. After about half a year of waiting and watching, we began to see a change. She became livelier and started growing. When she was a year old, she was recovered.”

Charlotte’s recovery coincided with an almost manic energy for writing. De Jong had written poetry as a child and even announced to her parents that she was going to be a writer, but this was a shift into high gear. “There is a name for this; it’s called the midnight disease. After Charlotte got well, life opened up; I couldn’t go back to my old job, I had to reinvent my world. Writing saved me. I wrote poems. I was working with my heart. Even so I had no idea of being a writer.”

WRITING PROCESS

She wrote at night time after falling asleep with all her children together in one bed. “We’d go to bed between seven and eight, I’d read them stories and we’d fall asleep. Robbert would join us when he came home and then I’d get up between two and three in the morning and write eagerly,

driven to do so.”

Before having children, de Jong had been focused on a career path; she believed that kids shouldn’t sidetrack a woman’s career. Even before her first child was born, she had lined up fulltime daycare. All that went out the window with Charlotte’s illness.

The couple’s three children were born at home in one of Amsterdam’s typical tall, narrow red brick 17th century buildings on a canal. With no garden, the family would sit on the front stoop and watch the world go by. For play, the children would go to a small pocket park nearby. The neighborhood school was so close, de Jong could wave to her children from the window of their home while they sat in their classroom. After walking them there, she would sit with other young mothers at a local café. “Here you drop off your kids by car and go; everyone lives in their homes rather than engaging on the street and in cafés. I miss this very much. In Amsterdam there are opportunities to meet people casually all the time, here social relations are so much more formal.”

De Jong’s first novel, *Lange Dagen (Long Days)*, for which the movie rights have already been sold, was written in that tall narrow house. The process gave her back a sense of individual identity. Essentially autobiographical, the book was inspired by a family trip to Lapland and is told from the perspective of a 14-year-old girl who is quite as observant as her creator. “I can close my eyes and be there in that tiny room on the third floor of that old canal house, shutting out the mess of kids’ shoes and raincoats, toys and books, cocooned in my space, looking at the world from inside out.”

It has taken longer for de Jong to get to grips with a memoir of her daughter’s illness. Although she started working on it in Princeton, she found the journey back to that time made her so sad that she set it aside. Now almost finished, the manuscript centers on the power of intuition and the dictates of a mother’s heart. “I was totally sure that we were doing the right thing. I never had any doubt. I felt intuitively that I knew what was needed. I held her close to my body, I fed her when she wanted to be fed and I kept her with me all of the time.” It is a story of survival, of trust and of setting boundaries and de Jong has been amazed at the audience response when she’s read excerpts in public.

WRITING TODAY

Interviewed at home in Olden Farm, the official residence of Institute directors since the days of J. Robert Oppenheimer, de Jong describes her writing process today. She’s quite candid in admitting that she couldn’t do her work and take care of her family without help in the house. That makes all the difference, she says. And it also helps that Olden Farm has lots of space; in her old canal home, she had to carve out room of her own.

Working in an expansive room where the Bechstein piano and several pieces of furniture that once belonged to Albert Einstein share space with modern artworks by her husband, the author has settled into a productive and disciplined writing pattern. She confesses to having a few rituals as a way of getting reality out of the way: “my green tea, my spot by the fire, my bowl of fragrant lavender; as a warm up I procrastinate but once I’ve started, I’m so involved that I hear nothing if I’m interrupted.”

She types fast with just two fingers, sometimes finding what she writes surprising. “You are a tourist in your own universe; you find a beautiful shell you didn’t know was there and you tap into your own unconscious; at least I think that’s what you do.”

In studying her craft she looks to Joan Didion for style and tone and she’s a fan of Nora Ephron. “I write to understand myself in such a way that connects me to others,” she explains. “Even though

I can be extroverted at a party, I am totally happy with my own company. I'm essentially an introvert and putting my thoughts on paper is a way of connecting. I dig into my unconscious for what moves me and I'm especially drawn to subjects that are taken for granted."

She describes Princeton as "an amazing community." It wasn't a hard decision to come here, she says. "I live in two worlds now; it's not a case of giving anything up, it's an enrichment. I count my blessings and there isn't anything that isn't a blessing. I'm grateful for everything that surrounds me and for what people offer me. I am lucky: my daughter survived and we got stronger out of it."

De Jong's critically acclaimed 2008 debut novel, *Lange Dagen*, received the 2008 Golden Owl Literature Readers Prize. Her second, *Diepte vrees* (*Depth Fear*), published in 2010, has been widely praised for its strong, elegant prose.

Last summer, Dutch publisher, Prometheus, compiled more than 100 of her columns into a book called *Flessenpost*. De Jong has translated a few of her *Notes in a Bottle* into English and published them, along with some of her other recent writing, including the first chapter of her novel *Lange Dagen*, in a slender booklet. You can find her Dutch and English writings on her website: www.piadejong.com.

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