

PRINCETON: Holding a mirror to American life

Everything is fodder for Dutch novelist, columnist Pia de Jong

By Philip Sean Curran, Staff Writer

Posted: Tuesday, February 3, 2015 11:27 AM EST

Every



Dutch novelist and columnist Pia de Jong read from two of her columns for about 150 people at the Institute of Advanced Study on Friday, Jan. 31. (Photo by Rebecca Nowalski)

Tuesday, readers of the Amsterdam newspaper NRC Handelsblad get to learn about the everyday things that happen to Pia de Jong, the Dutch novelist who has lived in Princeton for not quite three years.

Since leaving Holland, she has written a weekly column called "Flessenpost," Dutch for "Notes in a Bottle," about life in America — more than 100 columns since September 2012. Her topics run the gamut: seeing Woody Allen in person, celebrating Memorial Day and writing about the local man who sweeps the sidewalks on Nassau Street.

"Everything is fodder for my column," she said at a public talk and reading on Friday at the Institute for Advanced Study, where her husband, Robbert Dijkgraaf, is the director. "My ideas come from anything that happens to me."

Ms. de Jong spent Friday, which also was her 54th birthday, answering questions from the audience of 150 people, reading from two of her columns and reflecting on the differences between Americans and their Dutch counterparts.

"I think living here, especially since I write, I have to observe, and that makes me very aware of the things that I see," she said.

Friend and former People magazine managing editor Lanny Jones, who participated in Friday's event, said Ms. de Jong "holds up an unblinking mirror to American life." He said her writing tone combines "a little bit of de Tocqueville and a little bit of Russell Baker."

At the event, free booklets were given out of English translations of some of Ms. de Jong's columns, a piece she wrote in 2013 for the Washington Post and an excerpt from her book "Lange Dagen."

She arrived in New Jersey not long before Superstorm Sandy hit the state in October 2012. Though not as devastated as the shore towns, Princeton endured power outages and a sharp disruption to daily life.

"That was something that really got me," she said of Sandy. "I signed up for a new life and a new experience, but I didn't sign up to die here."

Ms. de Jong came to professional writing late in life, having been a therapist and a business consultant. She has written novels, children's books and newspaper and magazine articles. She calls fiction "my first language, and it's also much easier for me."

"It was very hard for me to write columns. Because as a fiction writer, you just make up things," she said.

When Mr. Jones asked her about the differences between Dutch people and Americans, she said Americans are nicer. Yet she said the Dutch are open about discussing the supposed off-limits topics of religion and sex.

She said her home country is changing, though. Like other places in Europe, there are tensions with the local Muslim population. The massacre last month at the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo "really scared the Dutch people," she said.

In one of her columns, she touched on that subject: "Why were Americans not as outraged by the Charlie Hebdo shootings as were Europeans? If anything, the reaction in the U.S. has been strikingly muted."

In an interview afterward, she said her columns are well received. Her editor back in Holland has turned down only one piece she wrote, about having her cats declawed. There would be too much outcry from animal rights people, she was told. The most feedback she got about one of her pieces was one about having dinner with movie director Oliver Stone and one his sons at her house. Mr. Stone, she remembered, "kind of started flirting with me."

"And I wrote it all in my column," she said, "and people found it hilarious."

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