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Pia de Jong: Writing Beyond Words, Story, and Self

by Dan Aubrey

"I hope the quota for dead children has been reached. That death has claimed enough of them."

The words belong to Dutch-born Princeton novelist and essayist Pia de Jong. They were what she had hoped for on the day she went to purchase a gravesite for her newborn daughter. Now they appear in de Jong's just released book, "Saving Charlotte: A Mother and the Power of Intuition."

"I started writing (the book) with the scene of the grave," de Jong says about her 255-page personal account of discovering her daughter, Charlotte, had congenital myeloid leukemia — a disease without any cure — and the decision to spare the infant from the debilitating effects of chemotherapy and "wait for what will come." What came was the body's ability to fight off the disease.

"I felt like I was falling in that grave," de Jong says about reliving in words an emotionally challenging time. "It was very painful. I stopped writing and became depressed. Now it is a beautiful book. And Lanny saved me."

Lanny is the Princeton-based editor and writer Landon Jones. He is the co-translator of the book that was published Dutch last year.

It's an early summer morning at de Jong's Olden Farm home in Princeton. She lives there with her husband, mathematical physicist and Institute for Advanced Study director Robbert Dijkgraaf — they met when students at Utrecht University — and their three children: Jurriaan, 20, Matthijs, 18, and, yes, Charlotte, 16.

Now far in miles and years from the Amsterdam graveyard, de Jong sits with Jones at a rustic wooden table in her kitchen. Her lipstick-red day dress and his powder-blue shirt are the first of many contrasts in this odd couple relationship:

She is a bestselling Dutch writer and newspaper columnist for NRC Handelsblad in Amsterdam. He is the former editor of Money and People magazines and author of books and articles on American culture and history.

She was raised in the Netherlands. He was born in Georgia and grew up in St. Louis. Her father was a family hydraulic engineer. His father was an executive for Pet Milk. She is a trained psychologist. He was a member of a Life magazine investigation of the assassination of President Kennedy. She arrived in Princeton 2012 to live at the Institute. He arrived in 1962 to study English at Princeton and settled in town with his wife, Sarah.

She writes in Dutch. He doesn't even speak it — but understands her style and intent.

They sum up their partnership with a smile and a shrug — an understanding beyond language.

"There is a story underneath the book," de Jong says, getting down to business. "There is the superficial story about a sick baby who got better, and a mom taking care of the baby. (Yet) there is something in the fabric in your life that works for you if you see it. You have to be open. Nothing is ever just so in my way of thinking. There are things below the surface."

"What she does is to find the patterns in life," adds Jones.

"The only thing I needed to do was to connect the pieces," she says. "I could have made a mistake, but . . ." The silence hangs for a stage moment.

Then she continues. "I had to talk for her and had to protect her. It may be different for men than women, but I never felt more intuitive. I was never so strong in my life when she was sick. Not for me, for her."

An early indication of de Jong's awareness of something beyond herself comes when she and her husband bring their baby to the Amsterdam hospital and a doctor says, "You should prepare yourself for the worst. Charlotte may have little time left. Very little time."

The writer's response is revealing. "I want to sing for (Charlotte) through it, loud enough to drown out all other sounds. A children's song, like mothers all over the world sing to reassure their children."

She then slowly surrenders to an "all over the world" force that leads to her daughter's natural recovery and the creation this personal testament — one blending the details of life with what de Jong calls "a magical quality" — something casting a spell.

It comes in part from the story's present tense. "(It) is the better way to draw the reader in," she says. "The reader experiences something that is happening, rather than being told of something in the past."

It also comes in her self-described "simple and direct" approach, one she calls "a Hemingway-like style considered unusual in Holland — bare language laden with emotion."

Then there is the accumulation of repetitive details to stir the imagination. "I feel there is meaning in things we don't fully know. There are little things like names and stones. I know that people react to it even though I don't explain it. The names are so laden with connotation that people get it."

One example is the use of the color blue. It connects her baby's tumors, the Holland sky and water, a talisman-like stone, and a treasured recording, Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue." De Jong says her future husband introduced the recording right after they met and she invited him to a party. She says the "blue" — or sad — sound connected with her like poetry. And in the book the recording works like a silent soundtrack — and a tonal inspiration. "There's a rhythm in the writing. I took things out because it disrupted the jazz rhythm," de Jong says.

The book's lyrical and poetic qualities also reflect the writer's reflex at the time. "I was writing poetry," de Jong says. "I didn't have much time. I was there for the kids. I wasn't a writer then, but I did write poetry. It helped me. Poetry is so powerful."

Another musical element is the reference to opera arias sung by Maria Callas pouring through the attached wall connecting an unseen neighbor and the couple's rented home in a less fashionable neighborhood — complete with a young prostitute working across the street. "I always connected to Maria Callas," says de Jong. "She is the ultimate female with all her pain, beauty, and talent."

The introduction of Callas and opera allows de Jong to lyrically heighten the story and introduce what she calls "these archetypal women in my book." They range from the Madonna to shaman-like doctors, from cursed baby girls to evil fairies, and from caring mothers to a skilled seductress. The latter is the prostitute whom de Jong calls Cindy, short for the moon-goddess figure Cynthia.

Like the moon, de Jong's character changes her appearance — sometimes an artificial beauty, other times a plain young woman who also intuitively looks for hope and lights church candles to help Charlotte.

She is not alone. Throughout the book personas used in daily life stop to reveal themselves as individuals who realize that all they have is hope. That includes the doctors and even the writer herself, who can no longer depend on the knowledge she used to share with clients.

About this time of heightened awareness and imagination, de Jong says, "I had just given birth. If you are woman that is the most amazing thing. You become a body. I was just hormones. I think you're wiser and connect to who you are, especially after birth. You are even more yourself. It is a very powerful thing."

Jones smiles and says, "It is easy to think of this as a women's book, but men are very responsive. I can't explain it."

De Jong has an answer. "For men, children are very powerful entities in their lives. But it goes through a woman. So (men) have to gauge women and trust them." She also has a question: Why do men so often leave the women who gave them children?

The book's male archetypes are also an explanation. Her husband — the internationally celebrated University of Amsterdam professor who focuses on string theory and quantum gravity — becomes a wizard unlocking the mysteries of life and discovering a seed of hope: the story posted online of an African-American boy who naturally recovered from the disease.

The boy in turn becomes — in de Jong's imagination — Samuel (a Biblical name that can be translated as "God has heard"), an imaginary angel who brings messages of hope. And gruff neighbor Mackie becomes a lone knight, a protector of women: caring for his elderly mother, worrying about de Jong and her baby, and confronting the men coming into the neighborhood to use the hooker.

"I wanted to write about intuition and hope," says de Jong of her effort. "There are so many people who are in painful situations. Despite darkness, there is hope and trust and connection to a sea of pain around us."

"I have a deep empathy for people who are not perfect. There is a world where we have to behave in a certain way. For some people that is brutal. (As a therapist) I did a lot of work with a lot of imagination. I put people in a light trance and worked on their subconscious. The book works like a light trance — you go into an underworld with stones, and it is a dream world. I hope the book has a post-hypnotic effect. That it takes you somewhere."

When the topic of intuition and her husband's work in physics arises, de Jong says "We are both working intuitively. Robbert says math is intuition — and physics. Where do you start to work? You have to connect things. If Robbert is working he loses track of time; I don't want to disturb him. If you disturb him you may disturb something that is connecting him, this flow. It's a magical thing."

Then talking about the power of writing, she says, "In the old days writers and poets were seers. We should be aware of how powerful we are as writers. Being alive is all about hope. And you get hope by developing the seer side in you or finding people who hope and root for you. People are saved from the most terrible things by hope."

It is not surprising that de Jong's birth as a writer occurred in 2001 when Charlotte recovered. As she writes, she rose in the night, picked up an old pen, let "midnight blue" ink run free, and began "to weave a new cocoon . . . made of words."

Yet her rebirth as a writer in America presented a new challenge — and the partnership.

"It was in a strange situation," de Jong says about her arrival in Princeton in 2012. "I was living my writer's life in Holland. When I moved nobody (here) could read me or knew what I did."

Her sense of displacement was externalized by Hurricane Sandy and the falling of a tree in front of her new home. "It was like me, so disconnected," she says. "I left my country for my husband's dream to become the director of the Institute. I thought I could die here, and I thought 'Where would I be buried? Where was my place?'"

As she struggled for a native language, familiar words, and a voice to reflect her new situation, she found something unanticipated. "It didn't matter if I didn't know the word for tree. It was the truth that mattered. It freed me up. It's the object and phenomenon free from the language that constrains. It was a freeing of energy I didn't know. It opened me up."

Then after NRC Handelsblad asked her to write a weekly column about being in Princeton — "Flessenpost," or Notes in a Bottle — she met Jones at a party. "He figured out I was doing the column, got them through the internet, and put them through Google translation," she says.

Jones continues the story: "When I started getting the Google translations, I realized what a good writer she was. She had a wonderful, perceptive view, and I wanted to bring that to the attention of people here. It's a wonderful combination of being honest about what she reports on it and being empathetic. She's telling stories through people. She has a gift for doing that. Everything becomes personal."

She looks over at Jones and says, "We got used to working together. He knew my style and translated my pieces and got a grip of what I'm about."

Since then de Jong's articles have appeared in the Washington Post, Princeton Echo (a sister publication to U.S. 1), and in the Institute for Advanced Study publication "Pia's Princeton: Unconventional Observations from a Dutch Writer." Now the two are celebrating the publishing of "Saving Charlotte" by W.W. Norton & Company.

"My publisher in the Netherlands suggested writing the book about my daughter," de Jong says. "Lanny was intrigued from the beginning and wanted to know what the book was about. He read chapters as I was working on them. It was Lanny's idea that people in America should read the work."

His encouragement kept her "from falling in the grave," and his New York expertise helped her to promote the story and find an agent and American publisher.

The book also helped give voice to something that touched him, too. "Right before we met I was diagnosed with a bone-marrow disorder that is in the same family of leukemia as Charlotte's. So it somehow seemed providential."

Or something de Jong senses when she writes about one of her challenges: "Every once in a while, one is offered a chance to understand oneself in a different way. This was one of them."

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