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Dutch Author, Pia De Jong Speaks On Immigration At Princeton Public Library

BY VITA DUVA

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Dutch novelist and newspaper columnist Pia de Jong moved from Amsterdam to Princeton in 2012 after her husband Robbert Dijkgraaf was asked to become the director of the Institute of Advanced Study.

“We were apprehensive at first, having a full life in Amsterdam – children happily going to school, Robbert’s work close, my publisher, Prometheus, across the canal – but we decided it would be a learning opportunity for all of us, so we jumped into the unfamiliar,” de Jong said of her relocation to Princeton.

De Jong will speak more on her personal journey to Princeton and the struggles she faced as an immigrant in America on Monday, March 2 at 7 p.m. at the Princeton Public Library.

During her talk, the award-winning writer will also discuss her adjustment to writing in English and what it has taught her about the immigrant experience.

“I have a portable career. I write wherever my computer is, so at first, I figured it would be easy for me. But I missed my readers. I missed the daily feedback on columns that I wrote,” de Jong shared of her difficulty adjusting as an immigrant in America.

But, it wasn’t until after Superstorm Sandy that Jong wrote a piece for The Washington Post about feeling uprooted. Suddenly, she was getting great feedback from readers – people who had lived there, sometimes for more than half a century – were still feeling uprooted, too.

“That made me feel connected to an audience, and I realized that I missed that. So, I decided to publish more in English,” she said. “The difficulty, of course is the language. Language is all about subtleties – about what is not said, and about the right connotation.”

De Jong’s appearance is part of the library’s “Currents: Conversations that Matter” series, which examines current issues through a global, national and local lens.

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Immigration is the topic of the inaugural Currents series that got under way this winter.

“In creating this series on immigration, we wanted to focus on all aspects of the topic and not define the range of the immigrant experiences too narrowly. Too often, immigration is narrowly associated with laborers who seek a better life across the border for their families, whether legally or illegally,” said Janie Hermann, public programming librarian at PPL.

Princeton has a significant immigrant population spanning all walks of life from around the globe. And while many are here legally, some are also here undocumented – several with families and children – who have just now begun to establish themselves.

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“Many of the families who are not here legally still face a variety of hardships, from not being able to afford proper housing and fear of deportation to lack of access to higher education and wage theft by unscrupulous employers,” Hermann said.

Hermann went on to explain that PPL has been working closely with Elise Neira from Princeton Human Services, as well as representatives from the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund to bring these issues to light around the community.

As for de Jong, her advice to immigrants in Princeton in need of help is: “be open, and seek aid. There is so much to do in this place – wonderful courses and lectures. Find them and speak up. Never assume that you are alone.”

The program will be moderated by Landon Jones, former editor of People and author of “Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation.”

For more information about de Jong’s talk and/or the lecture series, call (609) 924-9529 or visit www.princetonlibrary.org.

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