British Writer Chosen for 'Peter Pan' Sequel

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By Paul Majendie

LONDON (Reuters) - British author Geraldine McCaughrean fought off 100 writers from around the world on Sunday to land a daunting literary challenge -- writing the authorized sequel to "Peter Pan."

"I am delighted beyond words," said McCaughrean after being picked by a London children's hospital which owns the rights to J.M. Barrie's classic tale of Tinkerbell, Wendy, Captain Hook and the boy who never grew up.

"It is an astonishing, daunting privilege to be let loose in Neverland armed with nothing but a pen," she said.

The Great Ormond Street hospital in London launched the search for a sequel last year to mark the centenary of the classic and to keep much needed funds flowing when the copyright runs out -- in Europe in 2007 and in the United States in 2023.

The judges, flooded with entries from South America, Australia, the United States and Europe, opted for a home-grown author to extend the life of Barrie's immortal characters.

McCaughrean, author of over 130 books and plays and the only writer ever to capture the Whitbread Children's Book Award three times, won with her sample chapter and synopsis of a follow-up tale called "Captain Pan." One of the judges, Barrie's great-great nephew David, said of the competition: "Captain Pan had a real fight on his hands but won through in the end. I think JM Barrie would have liked his style. If I'm wrong he'll be back to haunt us."

Hospital chief executive Jane Collins, welcoming a new source of income for Great Ormond Street, said: "'As Peter Pan' has inspired three films in five years, the story can clearly still fly.

"With half our beds in a building dating back to the 1930s, any little help from Captain Pan and his friends will be very welcome."

Barrie donated the rights to the hospital in 1929. They have since provided what it calls "a significant but confidential" source of income. He died in 1937.

"The primary objective was to create a new authoritative Peter Pan work that sets a new benchmark because the original work goes into the public domain in 2007 and we wanted to make sure the characters stayed alive," said the hospital's copyright lawyer Nigel Bennett.

The hospital will own the copyright to the new book. The advance and royalties will be shared equally between the hospital and the author.

McCaughrean, overjoyed at being picked, told Reuters: "It scares the living daylights out of me but once the hype is behind me, I shall settle down and enjoy writing it.

"This is a thing infinitely worth doing."