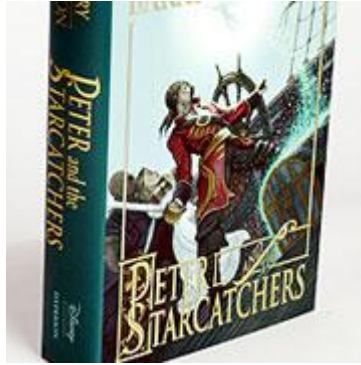


Peter Pan's early years

By Bob Minzesheimer, USA TODAY

One night, bedtime reading for the Pearson family was the unabridged, illustrated version of J.M. Barrie's century-old classic, *Peter Pan*. Paige Pearson, 5, looked her father in the eyes and asked, "But Daddy, how did Peter Pan meet Captain Hook?"



Peter and the Starcatchers was born during a pre-bedtime storybook session between Ridley Pearson and his daughter, Paige.

Daddy, who happens to be Ridley Pearson, a prolific writer of thrillers, says that at that moment, "I experienced a brain freeze and said right back to her, 'Paige, that is a novel, and I'm going to write it.' "

A week later, Pearson, a former singer/songwriter who lives in St. Louis, was in Miami to perform with the Rock Bottom Remainers, a garage band of baby-boom writers, including Stephen King and Amy Tan, who play at literary benefits. He was staying with his friend and bandmate, humorist Dave Barry.

"We're a terrible band," Barry says, "but Ridley's a fine bass player, and as our totally incompetent lead guitarist, I have learned to follow his cues."

So when Pearson mentioned a prequel to *Peter Pan* and asked if Barry wanted to collaborate on it, a writing partnership immediately was formed.

Barry had never collaborated with another writer. "I've always had a hard-enough time collaborating with myself," he says. "But it was such an intriguing idea, and I figured if I could work with anybody, it'd be Ridley. He's my buddy, I trust him."

Two years and hundreds of e-mails later, Barry and Pearson's *Peter and the Starcatchers* (Hyperion, \$17.99), a fast-paced, 452-page adventure aimed at kids 10 and older, is being published this week.

There have been several sequels to *Peter Pan*, but *Starcatchers* may be the first prequel to the enduring tale of a boy who won't grow up. The original story, Barry says, "represents a wonderful escape, for children especially, from the confinements of a world run by grown-ups." (**Related story:** [Follow the *Peter Pan* timeline](#))

Every kid dreams of running away, Pearson adds, "but how many fly, and don't come back for a while and don't miss home?" Self-propelled flight adds to the appeal: "We all dream of it. Even Erica Jong (who wrote *Fear of Flying*). And pirates and magic dust and mermaids. It has everything kids think of, even in this *Lord of the Rings*/*Star Wars* world."

Barrie's story has inspired musicals and movies, animated and otherwise. Barry has memories of the 1955 TV adaptation: "Mary Martin flying around in tights, hung from wires. I thought, 'Wait a minute. That's a lady.' "

Peter Pan inspired Michael Jackson to name his California ranch Neverland. (No comment about that from Pearson and Barry.) And it has given a name to the "Peter Pan Syndrome," which afflicts men who act like boys. Barry says he's not mature enough yet to be compared to Peter Pan.

There's a scholarly book, *Now or Neverland: Peter Pan and the Myth of Eternal Youth: A Psychological Perspective on a Cultural Icon*. And coming in November is a movie, *Finding Neverland*, starring Johnny Depp as Barrie, the Scottish playwright who befriends a widowed mother of four and creates a fantasy

world for her boys. The youngest was Peter. "Pan" comes from the Greek god of the woodlands. In the movie, the widow is played by Kate Winslet, who early in her career played Wendy on stage.

'Just sat down and got writing'

Barry, 57, has written two novels, including *Big Trouble*, which was made into a movie, and 23 collections of humor, including *Boogers Are My Beat*. Pearson, 51, has published 20 novels, most recently *The Body of Peter Hayes*.

Neither Barry nor Pearson had written for kids before; they just wanted to write an exciting story that would explain how Peter learned to fly and came to live on an Indian-and-pirate-infested island called Neverland.

"We didn't do a lot of analyzing," Pearson says. "We wrote a novel our kids could read and one that didn't speak down to its readers. Beyond that we just sat down and got writing."

They started, in a sense, with Barrie's ending.

"When you look creatively at the classic," Pearson says, "there's just so much to work with: a boy who can fly, a scantily clad fairy who never leaves his side, a boy who never grows up, a shadow left behind in London, a mystical dog, a connection between Wendy's mother and Peter that is never explained. Oh, and how did Peter meet Captain Hook? And who is Captain Hook?"

Peter and the Starcatchers answers only some of those questions, but Pearson and Barry have plans for a trilogy of prequels. "What do you call that?" Barry asks. "A trilogy of prequels," Pearson replies.

Adventure sets sail

Starcatchers opens as Peter and other wards of a Dickensian home for "wayward boys" are shipped off to be servants of a cruel island king who, word has it, feeds his underachieving staff to a pet snake that once ate the king's father.

On board the ship, the Never Land, Peter meets and is smitten by a mysterious, headstrong girl named Molly who, the authors hint, may be related to Barrie's original Wendy.

With Peter's help, Molly tries to safeguard the ship's secret cargo, a magical, elevating material called "starstuff," the stuff of which Tinker Bell will later find useful.

But the most feared pirate on the seas, Black Stache, who loves other people's misery, and his not-so-able assistant, Smee, also want the starstuff. In the wrong hands, it could be bad news for everyone who's not a pirate.

After encounters with a hurricane, talking dolphins, jealous mermaids and a supersized crocodile, the survivors end up shipwrecked on an island where the natives have good reason not to welcome tourists.

Pearson began the collaboration writing a sample chapter. Barry rewrote it, Pearson rewrote the rewrite, then Barry rewrote that. Both say it wasn't as contentious as it sounds. "It seemed so natural to write this together," Pearson says. "I love to plot and get detailed and complicated. Dave loves to keep things simple and find the humorous angle."

They communicated mostly by e-mail, developing what Pearson calls a "third voice that's neither mine nor Dave's, but ours." Barry calls it a case of "Vulcan mind-meld."

Pearson credits Barry with the idea for the treasured starstuff, a key plot device that's "a magical stroke that provides the explanation, the internal logic, of why Peter can fly."

Barry says it was Pearson, supposedly the more serious writer, who wrote the scene where the pirates resort to using a gigantic black bra for a sail. "I know I will be accused," Barry says, "since ladies' underwear is involved."

Pearson and Barry were aware that the original *Peter Pan* and the 1953 Disney adaptation are no longer politically correct: "We felt we could bring things back around in that regard," Pearson says. "We agreed

early on to make the natives on the island intelligent, English speaking (at least one of them) and cunning, The stereotypes in the original are a little hard to take in present time."

But mostly, he says, "we wanted something our young children could read. (Pearson has another daughter, 5; Barry has a 4-year-old daughter and a 22-year-old son.) My thrillers are basically PG-13 or R, as are Dave's two mysteries, and even some of his humor. So a prequel to *Peter Pan* seemed a great shot at making a book to show our children."

It's working, Pearson says. His daughter Paige, now 7 and entering second grade, is just starting to read, "but took it on herself to read *Peter and the Starcatchers*. She took her time, and we read some of it to her, but for the most part she read the 400 pages in little over a month, all by herself."

Her favorite part is the last line of the acknowledgements, the one that reads, "And above all we thank Paige Pearson, for asking her daddy one night, after her bedtime story, exactly how a flying boy met a certain pirate."