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American Writers Museum: A Bookish Proposal

By ANNA RUSSELL



Amaze Design

A rendering of a gallery where children would meet favorite book characters.

Fictional heroes have long been fascinated by museums. In E.L. Konigsburg's children's novel "From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler," two siblings run away from home and hide out in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye," Holden Caulfield thinks longingly of the displays in the American Museum of Natural History. Now, if all goes according to plan, writers may finally have a museum to call their own.

On Monday, the first detailed plans for the American Writers Museum will be released by proponents of the project, with a targeted 2015 opening in Chicago. Spearheading the cause is Irish-born Malcolm O'Hagan, a retired businessman with a passion for literature, who has spent the last three years building a support base and raising funds for the proposed national museum.

"Most people are astounded that it doesn't already exist," says Mr. O'Hagan, 73, who serves as president of the American Writers Museum Foundation, which he runs with Werner Hein, senior counsel at the law firm Mayer Brown LLP, and Jay Hammer, president and chief executive of Theralogix, a nutritional-supplement company. "We have museums for everything else," Mr. O'Hagan said, "but nothing for great American writers besides individual authors' houses."

Mr. O'Hagan said the foundation has already raised "in excess of" \$300,000. It needs an additional \$10 million to open the first phase of the museum in 2015 in an existing Chicago building (no location has been selected). It has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chicago Community Trust and the Stead Family Foundation, among others, to cover initial planning and design costs. Mr. O'Hagan has invested some of his own money in the project. He said the group's ultimate hope is to raise a total of \$100 million for a larger stand-alone space, to open in 2020.

The proposed museum has found a support base in the nation's literary community. "I think it's high time," says David McCullough, author of "1776," among other history books. "If you took away Mark Twain or Willa Cather or Oscar Hammerstein II or Robert Frost, you'd be taking away big chunks of who we [Americans] are," he said.

Mr. O'Hagan, was raised in Ireland and has spent most of his career in the U.S. He is now based in Washington, D.C. He studied engineering and served as the head of the National Electrical Manufacturers Association until 2006, but he says he has always been a book lover. "I've probably got about 3,000 books," he said, "I have a library full of them and they're anywhere in the house my wife will let me put them."

He said the idea for an American Writers Museum was initially inspired by visits to the Dublin Writers Museum. The Chicago institution, however, would include several interactive displays to establish itself as a more dynamic destination than a typical manuscript and memorabilia collection. He cites the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C. and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland as models. The museum would focus on deceased American authors, though Mr. O'Hagan said he would like to invite writers to participate in readings and other events.

Proposed components include a digital "Literary Map," an interactive display where visitors would be able to explore famous literary locations or journeys—to wander the house in "The House of the Seven Gables," for example, or retrace the cross-country road trip in "On the Road." Among other proposed galleries are "Creating an American Literature" and "We Will Be Heard."

Though Mr. O'Hagan says he loves the stately grace of traditional libraries, this museum will focus on interactive and digital displays. "It will have an air of greatness, but not with mahogany," he said.

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