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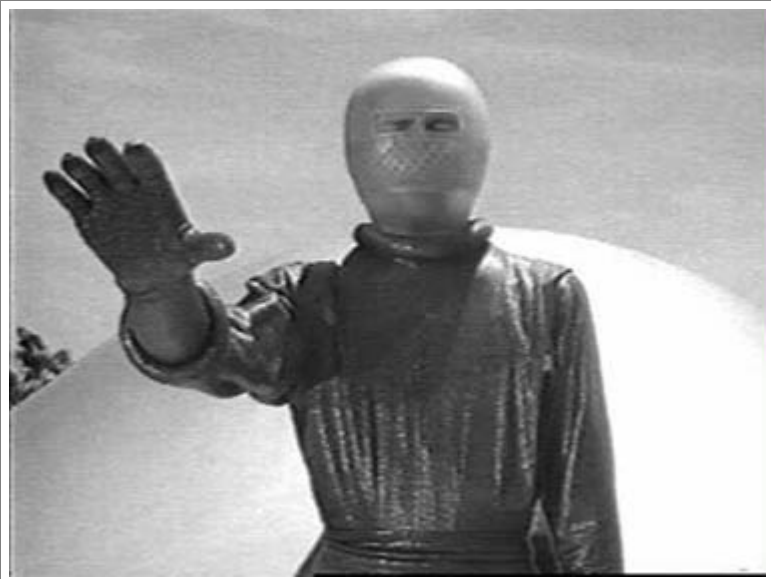
Fascination with extraterrestrial life extends into IWU classroom

By Christopher Weber '04

From H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* to Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, inhabitants of the "third rock from the sun" have always been intrigued, even obsessed, with the possibility of encountering extraterrestrial life.

With the discovery of more than 100 planets around distant stars and the increasing efforts of scientists to find signs of life on other planets, the idea that earthlings are alone in the Universe may not hold as much weight as it once did.

"I've never had aliens from another planet land in my backyard and no confirmed signs of alien life have been reported to date — yet extraterrestrials have been a widespread focus in the news and the media for many years," says Linda French, associate professor of physics at Illinois Wesleyan.



In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, one of the films shown in French's class, first contact with an alien results in hostility on the part of humans.

French, an astronomer by trade, is teaching a semester-long course this spring that focuses on the depiction of human-alien encounters in science fiction and popular culture.

"I wanted to develop a course that was different from the standard content curriculum," says French. "Space exploration is such a hot topic in the news right now, like NASA's recent placement of the *Spirit* and *Opportunity* rovers on Mars."

French's course is part of the Illinois Wesleyan Gateway curriculum, a seminar-style class for first-year students to develop critical thinking and writing skills.

Although her course mainly deals with human-alien encounters as portrayed in fiction, French spent the first day of class leading students in a spirited discussion on President George W. Bush's proposal to send a manned mission to Mars.

"I wanted to see if the students would try to take the stance that they thought I might suggest as an astronomer, or if they would take an opposing view," says French. "I was very impressed to find the class skeptical of the (proposal), citing political, economic, and social reasons why the plan might not be in the country's best interests at this time. It showed the students already thinking at a high level."

French is no stranger to the search for extraterrestrial life. As a graduate student at Cornell University, she worked with Carl Sagan and Frank Drake, both renowned for leading the astronomical field in the search for intelligent life beyond Earth. French helped put together a map of what the Earth would hypothetically look like to inhabitants of a distant planet. Included in an issue of *Scientific American* magazine, French's map accompanied an article by Sagan and Drake that was among the first to deal with the topic of communication between Earth and other planetary civilizations.

In her Gateway class, French covers works in a variety of mediums. Assigned readings include *Captured by Aliens: The Search for Life and Truth in a Very Large Universe* by Joel Achenbach, *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem, and H.G. Wells' 1898 classic *The War of the Worlds*. The class will also view such science-fiction films as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Contact*, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as well as several episodes of the T.V. series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

“The alien topic has so many interesting facets to it. I enjoy using this subject as a way to approach historical and current social issues — much like the authors and filmmakers of the materials we will focus on in class did when creating their works,” says French. She hopes that her students will use this idea to engage in thoughtful discussions in class, and throughout the semester be able to take away with them a new approach in how they think of the world, or worlds, around them.