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Mars Rovers Raise Extraterrestrial Questions Anew, Says Illinois Wesleyan Astronomer

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Sending exploratory missions into space, like NASA's Mars Exploration Rovers, has stimulated American's fascination with the search for extraterrestrial life, says Linda French, associate professor of physics at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"The kinds of missions that have been sent into space lately are looking at a deeper question of what the solar system is actually like," says French, who worked as a graduate student at Cornell University with both Carl Sagan and Frank Drake. "If we know of other planets that once supported life, that knowledge forces us to consider how common human beings are in the universe."

French conducted research for a Scientific American article that was among the first to examine communication between distant civilizations.

French is currently teaching a semester-long course that focuses on the depiction of human-alien encounters in science fiction and popular culture. The first day of class came shortly after President Bush publicly proposed his goal of returning astronauts to the moon and flying from there 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 issue, citing political, economic and social reasons why Bush's plan might not be in the country's best interests."

For her part, French has been uncertain about the wisdom of undertaking something as major as a manned mission to Mars.

"Some of the most important discoveries in astronomy and astrophysics in the last 50 years have come from ground-based observations—by the old-fashioned way of going to the telescope and staying up all night," says French. "For lower costs and less risk to human beings, using unmanned space craft like the Mars rovers really gives us more bang for the buck."

French recognizes that some may view space research as a luxury in comparison with, say, medical research. "Astronomical studies won't necessarily cure cancer," says French, "but I would hope that as a society we have enough curiosity to keep funding going for space research at some level."

To arrange an interview with French, contact either Chris Weber or Sherry Wallace at 309/556-3181.