

Unshackled from earthly roles, women become 'space oddities'

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Fifty-four years after the first screen portrayal of a human woman in space -- in the 1929 German movie *Woman in the Moon* -- the first female American astronaut, Sally Ride, took a real-life trip into space.

For the most part, [women](#) were, as Case Western Reserve University Professor Marie Lathers describes, "grounded." They were limited, especially in the post-WWII U.S., to roles "in the home, kitchen or backyard."

In her new book, [Space Oddities: Women and Outer Space in Popular Film and Culture, 1960-2000 \(Continuum\)](#), Lathers examines how female space travelers broke through this airy ceiling and went from the silver screen to the [International Space Station](#).

"This study poses woman in space as a problem, one that the U.S. space program, the media and popular culture wrestled with and worked through in fits and starts throughout most of the 20th century," writes Lathers, Elizabeth M. and William C. Treuhaft Professor of Humanities and French in the College of Arts and Sciences.

For earthbound women of the 1960s, films and popular television shows like *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Barbarella* primed the general public that men could give up a seat to accommodate a woman on those space journeys. Jeannie, whom Lathers describes as a somewhat alien in her ability to travel to outer space but still be grounded in her home duties, was not only a helpmate to an astronaut but seemed to have desires to be

one, too.

Lathers says the popular media provided a venue for society to exorcize some of its anxiety about women leaving the materiality of Earth. While issues surrounding women in space—including what it might mean for men and women to work for prolonged periods in the confines of a space capsule or shuttle—may have become the butt of jokes for astronauts and government officials, the public worked through questions about gender, family and a woman's "proper place."

Often these issues played out at the movies and on television. Characters such as the animated Mrs. Jetson, who cooked and cleaned her spaceship hovering over, and not too far from, Earth, assuaged those fears.

Films such as *Alien* and the more recent *Contact* helped assure the public that women could survive and make life-saving decisions in an alien environment, Lathers says.

Women got a boost into space as anti-discrimination laws shifted public opinion and cracked barriers that kept women from becoming astronauts. The first chance came with the (unofficial) qualifying tests for women to ride as crewmembers for Mercury flights. Soon those hopes were dashed as disheartened women, dubbed by the media as the Mercury 13, saw that opportunity evaporate with the realization that the required pilot training was only open to men.

Lathers' book evolved from her longtime interest in feminist issues and her SAGES University Seminar "Women in Outer Space."

In conclusion, Lathers shows, in the spaces of film frames, photographs and stories, "a woman is woven into space."

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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