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The summer of Sagan

From: RSchatte@aol.com
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The summer of Sagan

Astronomer's legacy lives, on Mars and at the movies

(CNN) -- He was a scientist's scientist, and brought new insights both to fellow experts and laymen. Though astronomer Carl Sagan died last December, his presence is still keenly felt -- both in science and in science fiction.

The landing site of the Mars Pathfinder probe has been dubbed Carl Sagan Station, a tribute from NASA scientists to a colleague who had a hand in virtually every planetary mission the agency has undertaken.

"In the midst of our joy, we also felt Carl's absence," said Louis Freedman of the Planetary Society after the dedication. "This is the first arrival of a U.S. spacecraft at Mars that Carl ever missed."

And Sagan is being remembered in an even more alien environment for an astronomer -- Hollywood.

"Contact," a film version of his 1985 novel, was the number two movie in the country last weekend. Sagan and Ann Druyan, his wife and a frequent collaborator, worked with the film's creators for two years prior to Sagan's death.

"We had a very strong sense that the greatest canvas of our age is the motion pictures," Druyan says. "If you want to really excite people and get the word out, that's the way to do it."

Getting the word out was one of Sagan's gifts. Millions and millions of people -- and estimated 500 million, in 60 countries -- saw "Cosmos," Sagan's 1980 television series that traced the origins of the universe. Sagan was also a prolific author, and won a Pulitzer Prize for his "Dragons of Eden" in 1978.

The legacy of Carl Sagan

"Contact" is the story of a scientist, played by Jodie Foster, who risks her credibility and even her life pursuing a signal from space. "I was watching it, and I was thinking 'Who does she remind me of?'," Druyan says. "And then I realized that she had captured the essence of Carl, that audacity."

Though he was a proponent of the idea of life on other worlds, Sagan remained, first and foremost, a scientist. In his 1996 book, "The Demon-Haunted World," Sagan attempted to debunk claims of UFO visits and abductions. Even in his science fiction, science came first.

"He said 'Look, I really just need to protect the science,'" director

Robert Zemeckis remembers. "He said, 'I just can't stand it when Hollywood movies talk down to the audience and get the science wrong.'"

Druyan applauds the finished product. "I think he would have felt that we fulfilled our mission to to convey something about the grandeur of the universe and the romance of science."

Sagan himself said, "This job is by no means done. We will voyage forever in the dark between the stars." With a mission of science and a flight of fancy as his legacy, Carl Sagan's voyage isn't done.

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