

Colloquium

DONALD R. WILKEN

“MATHEMATICS IN LITERATURE” IS THAT REALLY A MATH COURSE?

Friday, November 2, 2012

3:00 p.m. in ES-143

(tea & coffee at 2:30 p.m. in ES-152)

ABSTRACT. During the last couple of decades, writers of both fiction and non-fiction, dramatists, movie directors and television producers have increasingly turned to mathematics and the lives of mathematicians as a fertile source of material. My own career as a research mathematician and enthusiastic reader has led me recently to ponder the possibility of creating a course that engages students in noteworthy mathematical concepts, results or individuals, primarily through literary fiction and fictional biography. The result is a course that I created (and taught) entitled “*Mathematics in Literature.*” The promotion for the course was the following:

Do you like to read? Do you like mathematics? Combine your interest in both in a new and stimulating way. Read historical fiction and fictional biography with a focus on historically important mathematics problems, significant mathematicians or fundamental issues involved in the foundations of mathematical certainty. Read and discuss novels with protagonists who are mathematicians or with the narrative thread weaving mathematics and mathematicians into a web of intrigue.

This talk will discuss various aspects of the course and will include both a sample of readings from the source material and a brief description of the significant mathematical issues unifying most of the material.