



# Kiss me

## Innate or learned art?

By Robin Friedman

Sleeping Beauty and Snow White were both awakened by one. And it turned many a frog into a prince.

A mob kingpin gives the kiss of death, Catholics give the kiss of peace, Jews kiss the Torah, nervous flyers kiss the ground.

From the Old English, "cyssan," kissing is the touching of lips to some other thing, usually another person.

In a February 14, 2006 essay in *The New York Times*, author Joshua Foer calls kissing "a profoundly bizarre activity."

"The German language has words for 30 different kinds of kisses, including *nachküssen*, which is defined as a kiss 'making up for kisses that have been omitted,'" he writes. "The Germans are also said to have coined the inexplicable phrase, 'A kiss without a beard is like an egg without salt.'"

It takes a total of twenty muscles working cooperatively to kiss. And while other species engage in behavior that looks an awful lot like smooching, only humans engage in full-fledged tonsil hockey.

When is a kiss just a kiss?

"There are two possibilities," Foer writes, "Either the kiss is a human universal, one of the constellation of innate traits, including language and laughter, that unites us as a species, or it is an invention, like fire or wearing clothes, an idea so good that it was bound to metastasize across the globe."

The lip-smacking conventional wisdom is that kissing is not innate, but, rather, a learned behavior. For one, it doesn't exist in all cultures, as certain societies find the exchange of saliva repugnant.

The most famous non-kisses come from the practice of rubbing noses by the Inuit. Other cultures in Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas likewise didn't kiss until contact with Europeans.

Kissing gets you close enough to your partner to smell their scent (which can be a good thing or bad thing), and is one of the reasons anthropologists believe kissing actually evolved more from a sense of smell than taste. Many animals exhibit kissing-like behavior for the main purpose of sniffing each other out.

Modern dentistry and breath mints, however, have certainly contributed to the romantic triumph of the kiss.

Vaughn Bryant, an anthropologist at Texas A&M University, has traced the first kiss to India around 1500 B.C.E. when texts described lovers "setting mouth to mouth."

The Romans adored kissing, elevating it to a passionate art form.

Onur Güntürkün, a psychologist from Ruhr University in Germany who studies left/right sides of the brain, has found two-thirds of people tilt their heads to the right when kissing. With 90 percent of us right-handed, we apparently have a preference to look to the right and pay attention to events on our right.

But whatever its anthropology, history, or psychology, kissing seems to be advantageous.

A famous study found married men who kiss their wives before leaving for work live longer, get into fewer car accidents, and have a higher income than men who don't.

So pucker up.

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