

# The eyes

WHAT DOES WINKING MEAN?

# have it

by Robin Friedman

It can be flirty.

Friendly.

Sexy.

A signal.

An inside joke.

Or simply a way to say hello with your eyes.

And here's something you probably don't know. It's believed to be a tribute to Gandalf.

Winking, defined by Webster's as "to

man winking at a woman he doesn't know — invites a whole other set of unsubtle assumptions.

So, assuming inquiring ladies want to know, what does that innuendo-alicious wink from him mean?

Since a wink is a definite message — without the cognizance of others and according to an already understood code — it can also have a highly complex success-versus-failure rate.

After all, a wink is a failure if its

A man winking at a woman he doesn't know invites a whole other set of unsubtle assumptions.

shut one eye briefly," means many things to many people.

Deriving from the Old English, *winician*, it's thought to originate in European tradition. It was associated with the Nordic god, Odin, a wizard and model for Gandalf of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books.

Odin was mysterious, unpredictable, and misunderstood. His humor was subtle, ironic, and...misunderstood.

Odin only had one eye.

So, naturally, when trying to convey Odin's kind of humor, closing one eye conveys the message.

Or you can dispense with myths and simply subscribe to today's conventional wisdom that winking is a sign of mutual understanding between two people. Winker and winkee typically use the gesture to imply private insight of a public situation. Closing one eye suggests the secret is aimed only at the person being looked at; keeping one eye open means the rest of the world is the backdrop for this shared moment.

Of course, much of the meaning behind a wink depends greatly on the winker and winkee themselves.

Winking among close friends and family members involves harmless fun, definitely falling under the category of private insight/inside joke/mutual understanding.

But winking to a total stranger — or more bluntly, a

A recent on-line poll on the topic garnered these suggestions from its male respondents:

"I like!"

"This is your cue, baby."

"You've caught my eye."

"I'm interested."

"Hi!"

"Can I talk to you?"

"Smile for me, sweetheart."

"Want to take the next step?"

intended recipient does not see it; or sees it but doesn't know or forgets the code; or misconstrues it; or disobeys or disbelieves it; or if anyone else spots it.

In other words, winking is risky business. It can have a wrong time, wrong place, and most definitely, a wrong recipient.

In the hierarchy of unspoken communication, it is one dicey deed, indeed.

Numerous studies have shown higher-order mammals (read: chimps) interpret emotions by paying close attention to facial expressions. Granted, humans do this best, but when a chimp laughs, you know it, right?

Social species must learn this art to survive. After all, mistaking Grand Poobah Chimp's angry face for a happy face can result in an unexpected injury to the brain.

Scientists believe most human societies exhibit all the same facial expressions — happy, sad, surprised, angry. In one study, for instance, scientists showed photographs depicting facial expressions to a remote tribe with no contact to the outside world and, astonishingly, members of the tribe read every facial expression correctly.

Was there a "Smile for me, sweetheart" in there somewhere?

You'll have to wait for the sequel on that one.

Wink, wink.

