

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF DATING

Our present dating habits can feel like a natural part of existence, but in reality, they've only been around for a very short time and (we predict) won't continue for too much longer in their current form. Dating has a history, which it pays to try to understand as we navigate the ritual's often paradoxical and tumultuous aspects.

We can take a selective look backwards – as well as a peek forwards – at the history and future of dating:

*1489, Medina del Campo, Spain*

In a treatise signed between England and Spain, the two-year-old Tudor prince Arthur is formally engaged to Catherine of Aragon, who is at that point three years old. It's an extreme example of what is an entirely normal practice all over the world in the premodern era: Relationships are thought of as strategic transactions between families, where the feelings of the couple themselves are of no importance whatsoever. The idea that you might love, let alone be physically attracted to, the person you ended up married to would have been deemed profoundly irresponsible, if not plain peculiar.

*1761, Amsterdam, Netherlands*

The publication of *Julie*, a novel by the French Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, becomes the fastest-selling book ever written. The novel tells the story of Julie, a young woman from an aristocratic family

who is expected to marry someone of her standing, but, contrary to all the rules, falls in love with her middle-class teacher, Saint-Preux. However, they cannot get married because of the differences in their social status.

Rousseau is on the side of the unhappy couple – and his novel is the first major statement of the idea that relationships should essentially be founded on the feelings that exist between people, and have nothing to do with class, lineage or family concerns. But as yet, Rousseau and his novel see no way of upturning the social order: You still marry who your parents and society tell you to, but now at least, with Rousseau's help, you can feel very sorry that you have to.

*1855, Rome, Italy*

In the major Italian novel of the 19th century, *I Vicere* by Federico di Roberto, two characters, Lucrezia and

Benedetto, are in love but can't marry because Lucrezia's mother refuses to give her permission on the grounds of social propriety. Crucially, the mother is shown to be old-fashioned and narrow-minded; couples formed by 'reason' are, the novelist suggests, a lot less happy than those guided by instinct. The book works with the growing Romantic assumption that relationships should be based on sentiment and that the best chance of finding someone we can get on well with over a lifetime is not to fixate on what their job is or whether they come from a good family, but whether we experience an overwhelming physical and emotional attraction in their presence. Marriage should be a sanctioned union consecrated by a wondrous feeling.

*1892, London, England*

The most successful comic play of the year, *Charley's Aunt*, turns on the fact that Charley has invited Kitty to

lunch on a date but, at the last minute, learns that his aunt won't be able to join them. This creates a panic because a dating couple should have a chaperone, an older woman whose presence will ensure that nothing very intimate can be said or done. Charley's solution is to get a male friend to put on a dress and impersonate his relative. The comedic atmosphere of the play suggests that the old rules around dating are firmly on their way out and are accepted as having some of the fustiness of a maiden aunt. The audience is meant to agree that dating couples should be left on their own to discover how they feel; there should even be an option for a little kiss at the end if things go swimmingly (as they do for Charley and Kitty).

*1914, Eastbourne, England*

The young George Orwell gets into trouble at school when he is caught reading *Youth's Encounter* by Compton

Mackenzie, the first novel published in England that describes unsupervised adolescent dating. We're starting to move beyond the odd chaste kiss: Dating starts to be about sex as well.

*1960, Washington DC, USA*

The US Food and Drug Administration approves the first oral female contraceptive pill. The idea that a date can happily and uncomplicatedly lead to sex becomes not only an emotional but now also a practical possibility.

*1998, Los Angeles, USA*

Speed dating is invented and the romantic comedy *You've Got Mail*, the first major film based around online dating, is released. Both encourage the idea that it's important to search very widely before selecting a possible partner. By now, all the elements of modern dating are in place:

firstly, parents have nothing to do with it; secondly, all considerations of money and social status are deemed 'un-Romantic' and unimportant; thirdly, you are meant to be powerfully emotionally drawn to someone in order for a relationship to be deemed legitimate and viable in the long term; fourthly, sex is interpreted as a central part of getting to know someone; and lastly, you're meant to have a lot of dates (and possibly meet quite a few horrors on the way) before finally and happily settling down with that archetypal figure of the modern dating scene: The One.

*2009, Brussels, Belgium*

The European Union releases a report that reveals that fifty percent of married couples in countries across the union end up divorced after fifteen years. Though entirely ignored by Europe's dating couples, the report quietly raises the question of whether instinct is really