

THIN-SLICING TOM HANKS

The Hollywood producer Brian Grazer, who has produced many of the biggest hit movies of the past twenty years, uses almost exactly the same language to describe the first time he met the actor Tom Hanks. It was in 1983. Hanks was then a virtual unknown. All he had done was the now (justly) forgotten TV show called *Bosom Buddies*. "He came in and read for the movie *Splash*, and right there, in the moment, I can tell you just what I saw," Grazer says. In that first instant, he knew Hanks was special. "We read hundreds of people for that part, and other people were funnier than him. But they weren't as likable as him. I felt like I could live inside of him. I felt like his problems were problems I could relate to. You know, in order to make somebody laugh, you have to be interesting, and in order to be interesting, you have to do things that are mean. Comedy comes out of anger, and interesting comes out of angry; otherwise there is no conflict. But he was able to be mean and you forgave him, and you have to be able to forgive somebody, because at the end of the day, you still have to be with him, even after he's dumped the girl or made some choices that you don't agree with. All of this wasn't thought out in words at the time. It was an intuitive conclusion that only later I could deconstruct. "My guess is that many of you have that impression of Tom Hanks. If I asked you what he was like, you would say that he is decent and trustworthy and down-to earth and funny. But you don't know him. You're not friends with him. You've only seen him in the movies, playing a wide range of different characters. Nonetheless, you've managed to extract something very meaningful about him from those thin slices of experience, and that impression has a powerful effect on how you experience Tom Hanks's movies. "Everybody said that they couldn't. see Tom Hanks as an astronaut," Grazer says of his decision to cast Hanks in the hit movie *Apollo 13*. "Well, I didn't know whether Tom Hanks was an astronaut. But I saw this as a movie about a spacecraft in jeopardy. And who does the world want to get back the most? Who does America want to save? Tom Hanks. We don't want to see him die. We like him too much." If we couldn't thin-slice – if you really had to know someone for months and months to get at their true selves – then *Apollo 13* would be robbed of its drama and *Splash* would not be funny.