

# I've met anyone

## How does a Hollywood super-producer end up talking hair styles with Fidel Castro? Brian Grazer explains the basis of networking to Helena de Bertodano

I am patting the top of Brian Grazer's head. Or rather the top of his hair, which is a good two inches above his head. I thought it would feel like spiky hedgehog spines but in fact it's surprisingly soft. "I use a water soluble gel," he explains. "Except when I'm surfing — then I use solid wax."

It is a strange moment. It was his idea, I hasten to add: I am not quite impatient enough to ask to touch the hair of someone I have only just met, patiently given that he happens to be a Hollywood mega mogul, the producer of *A Beautiful Mind*, *Apollo 13*, among dozens of other movies. In 2007 Grazer was named one of *Time's* 100 Most Influential People in the World.

Grazer attaches huge importance to his hairstyle. "My hair is an extension of my personality. The only person I allow to touch it is [the actor] Ron Perlman. You can be the second person to grab my hair and pull it. I don't think I will risk that. In his recent book, *A Curious Mind*, Grazer goes further: "[The hair] lets people know that this guy isn't quite what he seems. He's a little unpredictable. He's not a pre-packaged, shrink-wrapped guy."

I meet Grazer, 63, at his beautiful Santa Monica mansion. He is informal and very courteous but also quite jittery, with a sort of manic energy to him. He seems reluctant or unable to sit still and concentrate for long periods of time. Wearing a grey patterned shirt, jeans, spotty socks and trainers, he has a phone almost permanently glued to his ear.

He shows me around the house — which is achingly sleek and modern — while simultaneously giving advice to a student he met at a book-signing event who wants to get into the movie industry. "You have to create stories like I did and inform them with sex appeal and controversy."

He moved into this house three years ago, shortly after splitting from his third wife. "I thought it was possible I'd be living here all alone so I wanted a place where I could be alone but never feel lonely. That's why everything is so airy." Photographs on the sideboards display Grazer snorkelling with his kids (he has four), Grazer with Mick Jagger, Grazer with Fidel Castro, while giant silver letters on the wall spell out "N-O-W". "It's a word that I love," explains Grazer, sipping an espresso. "I want to actualise things now. I couldn't be content with 'now'."

Having got engaged last year to Veronica Smiley, 41, a marketing consultant and former girlfriend of John Cleeve, Grazer is no longer alone. "I'm an optimist," he says, referring to his impending fourth marriage. "I ask what he looks for in a partner."

"Kindness," he replies immediately. "His book, *A Curious Mind*, which has

spent several weeks on the New York *Times* bestseller list, is a dissertation on the importance of being curious, speckled with entertaining anecdotes about the famous people Grazer has met. The people he has met range from Michael Jackson to Barack Obama, Nigella Lawson, Hillary Clinton, Andy Warhol and Norman Mailer.

As a young man, Grazer set himself the goal of having "curiosity conversations" at least once a fortnight, seeking out interesting strangers — from Nobel laureates to authors to spies — to chat with. As a producer, he was working with some of the biggest names in the business, from Tom Hanks to Angelina Jolie. In an attempt to broaden his perspective he made a rule for himself that the people had to be from outside the world of film.

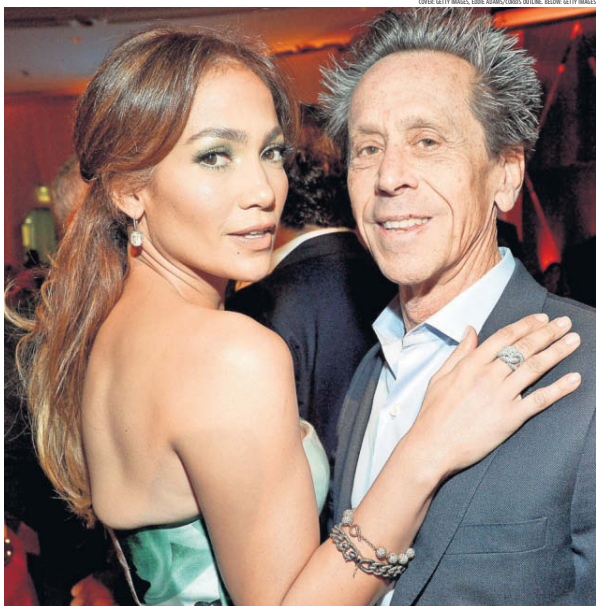
In the early days, when he was not so well established, it could take months, even years, to set up a meeting. I'd invent a million reasons why I couldn't be called upon. It was like a closed world. "I couldn't read for a job. Sometimes the meetings marked the beginning of a great friendship or provided the kernel of a movie. Only occasionally is he disappointed. "I met a famous guy recently who had created a position of some influence in food and restaurants. I couldn't believe how banal he was. I was shocked."

Grazer's upbringing was unimpressive. He was raised in a nondescript Los Angeles suburb, the oldest of three children born to Thomas Grazer, a criminal defence attorney, and his wife, Arlene. "I lived in a cul-de-sac, which I almost never left, although I really wanted to. It was like a closed world."

Reticent about his parents, Grazer simply says: "I'm very different from



# who matters. Here's how



them. They kind of terrorised me and I never wanted to terrorise someone." Later he says that his mother "tried" but it was his grandmother on whom he depended: "She was amazing. She made me feel safe and confident."

At school he struggled with learning difficulties. "I couldn't read as a child. I was always bobbing and weaving, trying not to get chosen [by the teacher]. I'd cough and pretend that my throat hurt. I'd invent a million reasons why I couldn't be called upon."

Nevertheless he managed to graduate from high school and went to USC, majoring in psychology before enrolling at its law school. He quit after overhearing someone say that they had just left their job as a legal clerk at Warner Brothers. He rang the company immediately, went in for an interview the next day and the next week started the job. From there he became a television producer and eventually a movie producer, but it was not easy. "You don't see a feel of the failure along the way. I see certain now that the greatest success of my life is my ability to cope with pain and to go beyond that and create triumphs out of failure."

As an example, he revisits to his mid-twenties — by which time he'd been fired from both Warner and Paramount. He set about trying to make a movie of his own, borrowing money from his mother. "I was completely broke. I'd already been out of work for a year. I gave myself one

more year to make a movie and said to myself, 'If I can't do it, I'll just take a job.' But in the 11th month I got paid to do this movie *Night Shift*."

*Night Shift* (1982) was a well-received comedy, directed by Ron Howard, who has since directed the majority of Grazer's movies. They founded Imagine Entertainment in 1986, producing movies that have grossed nearly \$14 billion. Grazer's films and TV shows have been nominated for 43 Academy Awards and 149 Emmys. He has been nominated for an Oscar four times, winning Best Picture for *A Beautiful Mind*.

Often the movies are a battle to make. No one wanted to back *8 Mile* (2002), about a young white rapper, Eminem, attempting to launch his career. "I believed that the movie would work if I could just make it." As usual, Grazer's instinct was spot on and the movie was both a critical and financial success: "It was about surviving the pain of humiliation, the pain of no respect. A lot of movies that I've made are about that subject."

Grazer once said that Howard brought "consciousness" to their partnership, joking that he lacked it, a trait he thinks he inherited from his father whom he said had a moral compass that "spun round and round". "He once told a funny story about how, when he wanted to build something out of wood in his backyard as a child, his father suggested he steal the wood from a school building site next door.

**Brian Grazer with Jennifer Lopez and, below left, with Cate Blanchett and Russell Crowe at Cannes in 2010**

nothing. She won't remember me." So I immediately started joking with her. I remember Tom Hanks looking almost aghast: "He ordered a bowl of ice cream that was not on the menu and invited her to share it with him. To his astonishment, she did."

Sometimes he goes too far. "I don't censor myself." He describes how he once visited Cuba with several friends, including the *Vanity Fair* editor, Graydon Carter, as a guest to meet Fidel Castro. Just as they were about to return home, Castro agreed to meet them, inviting them to lunch. The Cuban leader talked at them for hours, then suddenly stopped, pointed directly at Grazer and said: "How do you do your hair?" Grazer told him, but didn't leave it there. "Out of some sort of reflex — my own insecurity that he was asking me about my hair, I said, 'I'm a movie producer too. I just produced *Closest Land* about torture in third world countries. It was such a stupid thing to say." Carter saved the day by quickly interjecting: "He also made *The Klumps*."

Everything seems to come back to the hair. Grazer estimates that half the people he meets are curious about his hairstyle, a quarter think it's cool, "and the rest just think I'm a complete asshole. They are personally offended by it." He laughs gleefully and picks up his phone, taking out of the house to meet someone else. He is, as he says, a curious man. Perhaps in more ways than one.

***A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life*, by Brian Grazer, is published by Simon & Schuster, £16.99. Available from The Times Bookshop for £15.29, free p&g at [thetimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thetimes.co.uk/bookshop) or call 0845 2712134**

"I did have a conscience," says Grazer when I bring up the story. "I just didn't know how to go about executing it. Now I'm so good at it. I can keep secrets. I can be honest. I'm very empathetic and I think that's why my movies work."

He does seem to be profoundly affected by many of the people he meets. Describing his encounter with the entrepreneur Elon Musk, he is overcome with emotion: "I've never been around anyone who is that exceptional. I went to SpaceX and watched a [rocket] launch with him and I was in tears. I can't even describe the moment when you get to 7 minutes 10 because I'll break down." Grazer actually has tears in his eyes and stops talking for a few seconds, composing himself. "I think I have a very high emotional memory," he says by way of explanation. "I have a deep connection to the meaning of things."

Not one to take no for an answer, he goes further than most people would dare. He spent ages trying to set up a meeting with Diana, Princess of Wales, writing letters and calling Buckingham Palace. In the end he found his opportunity when he was seated opposite her at a formal dinner following a screening of *Apollo 13*.

"I watched 300 people stand for her in the room and I thought, 'If I conform to the etiquette I will learn

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