

Robert Towne '56
Pomona College Commencement 2010
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In 1956, I was pretty much sitting where you are now, waiting for all the speeches to end so I could graduate, get out of the sun, get on with my date for the evening and on with my life.

I'd been late with a philosophy paper; it didn't have to be accepted and if it wasn't, I'd flunk the course. But Fred Sontag read the paper, and said, "Robert, I've decided to accept your paper, as your graduation present." Maybe he really liked the paper or maybe he figured I'd been in school long enough. Who knew with Fred, that most disciplined yet most unexpected of men? In any case, as a result of that gift, 54 years later I find myself part of another Pomona College commencement, honored with another degree at least as unexpected and for which, President Oxtoby, I am most truly grateful. Most of all, however, it seems appropriate to give my thanks to the greatest gift--my education here at Pomona College.

In 1952, my freshman year, there were still orange groves and smudge pots, chilly nights and crystal clear days as though someone put the sun in the freezer overnight--if I had one thing I would have wished for you, it would be the air we breathed back then.

Since I've known I would be speaking here, I've thought about what I might like to hear and I realized to my fascination, and horror, that if someone my age now had been speaking to me at my graduation, chances are he would have been born in 1881, into a world without automobiles, telephones or few, if any, electric lights. He would have lived through two world wars; the death of monarchies; scientific, national and cultural revolutions seeming without end--yet I would have especially liked a word or two on what campus life was like for him back then.

For at Pomona, my fellow students, even when I didn't always realize it, were at the very center of my education. As a freshman I met Rod Starkey in the Coop; he was a 26-year-old senior who had flown 25 combat missions over Europe in a P51 Mustang. Even now it seems incredible that only a handful of years separated us from being in World War II. It was Rod who explained to me that those silk scarves fliers wore were not a fashion statement. Pilots had to constantly scan the skies above, below and behind them if they wanted to keep from getting unexpectedly shot down. Such vigilance made for some very chafed and tender necks that the scarves alleviated. Rod, I believe wore his girlfriend's silk underwear and found that it saved his neck quite nicely. He'd been one of three pilots to survive the 25 missions. For over 50 years now, I've been waiting for the World War II movie where I could use those silk scarves-

So I guess you could say I got my art education from Seymour Slive in Pomona's art Department and from Jack Zajac in his Claremont Studio.

There were, however, no screenwriting courses at Pomona in the 1950s or anywhere else for that matter. I don't think it occurred to anyone it was something to teach. A writer was either a playwright, a poet or a novelist and the received wisdom at the time was that a screenwriter was more of a hybrid--say somewhere between a pimp and a prostitute. While my father, an uncommonly open-minded man didn't find pimps morally repugnant per se, he found unemployed pimps repellent as a practical matter and this to him was practically the definition of a screenwriter.

Which, though he was never terribly articulate about it, was also his objection to a liberal arts

Robert Towne is a four-time Academy Award nominee and Oscar winner for the classic Chinatown. Towne was born in Los Angeles and raised in San Pedro, where he worked as a tuna fisherman, and went on to study philosophy and English at Pomona College, where he received his degree in 1956. Early in his career, Towne studied acting with fellow Pomona alumnus Richard Chamberlain and also worked with another Pomona alumnus, Kris Kristofferson, on Cisco Pike, written by Towne and starring Kristofferson and Gene Hackman. Towne's many screenwriting credits include Shampoo, The Last Detail, Mission Impossible I and II, The Firm, Greystoke (under his nom de plume, P.H. Vazak, his much loved Komondor dog who, Towne felt, deserved a better screen credit), and Days of Thunder. Towne directed four of his own scripts: Personal Best; Tequila Sunrise; Without Limits, his film about Oregon distance runner Steve Prefontaine; and Ask the Dust, a 2006 film of Towne's own adaptation of John Fante's book, a project dear to Towne's heart for many years.

Among many awards and honors, Towne is a two-time winner of the Writer's Guild of America Best Screenplay Award. He has served on the Board of Governors of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, and worked with the American Tunaboat Association, the Marine Mammal Commission, and the Environmental Defense Fund.