

**Douglas Preston '78**  
**Pomona College Commencement 2011**  
**May 15, 2011**

Thank you President Oxtoby, Dr. Perry, and the entire Pomona College community for this very great honor.

After graduating from Pomona, I took my first job at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. While there, I heard a curious story from an old curator about a scientific experiment that took place at the Museum eighty years ago.

In 1931, a mammalogist named Harry Raven came back from a collecting expedition in Africa with a baby chimpanzee, which he named Meshie. He had a beautiful little idea: he would raise Meshie alongside his other children in his suburban Long Island home to see just how human a chimpanzee could become.

This was the first time a scientist had attempted to socialize a chimpanzee as a human being. It was a landmark experiment.

Raven filmed Meshie's interactions with his family. Those remarkable films are now part of the Museum's archives. They show Meshie riding her tricycle in the local Fourth of July parade and sledding in the winter time. In one amazing sequence, Meshie picks up the family baby, carries her to a high chair, feeds her with a spoon, and then wipes up the mess.

The experiment lasted four years. And then Meshie reached maturity. She became aggressive and even violent. Raven was the only one who could control her. She bit one of his children to the bone. Finally, he was forced to send Meshie away to a zoo in Chicago.

A while later, he went to Chicago to see her. The zookeepers were very sorry to tell him that Meshie had become so violent she had to be isolated in a cage in the basement. She refused to have anything to do with the other chimps and attacked the keepers.

As Raven descended into the basement, he could hear Meshie screaming and hammering on the bars of her cage. They begged him not to go into the cage. But he insisted.

When he stepped in, Meshie rushed at him in attack. And then she recognized him. She threw herself in his arms and dissolved in a paroxysm of chimpanzee grief. She had to be pried off him, crying piteously.

Harry Raven left the zoo an utterly devastated man. He told a friend he felt like he'd imprisoned his own child. He was never the same again. Meshie died soon after.

I was so struck, so haunted, by this story that it became the basis for my first novel, JENNIE. Which, by the way, was also made into a bad movie.

I saw something big in this little story. Harry Raven was a celebrated scientist, at the very pinnacle of his profession. He thought he was conducting a beautiful little experiment on an



animal. He didn't take into account the human consequences. He failed to realize that everything in this world is connected – and that he, himself, was part of the experiment. As a result, it ended in tragedy.

I believe this is a story for our modern age, and it has a lesson not just for science but for all human endeavor. How many of our problems today have been caused by beautiful ideas that failed to take into account the larger human dimensions?

As you make your way in the world, my advice to you is always keep in mind the human consequences of your decisions and actions.

Beware of the beautiful ideas.

And never forget that we are all part of the experiment.

My warmest congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2011! Thank you.

### **About Douglas Preston**

Douglas Preston '78 is a journalist and best-selling author. He has published five non-fiction books, including *The Monster of Florence*, about an Italian serial killer. The book will become a motion picture starring George Clooney. Preston is the author or co-author, with Lincoln Child, of 21 fiction books. The most recent, *Gideon's Sword*, was published in February. He began his writing career as an editor for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, later writing a column in *Natural History Magazine* and becoming managing editor of *Curator Quarterly*. In 1985 he wrote *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, about the explorers and expeditions in the Museum's early days. As a journalist, he has published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Smithsonian*, *Natural History* and *National Geographic*, among other magazines. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, an advisory board member of the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, a member of the Governing Council of the Author's Guild, and co-president of International Thriller Writers. At Pomona College, he studied English literature and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. He served as editor of *The Student Life* and participated in a field experience program at Griffith Observatory, where his supervisor was fellow 2011 honorary degree recipient Edwin Krupp '66.