

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--just the sort of seemingly trivial detail that can give unexpected life and credibility to a dramatized moment.

Then again at the Coop, there was this surly guy in paint-spattered overalls having coffee at the counter, griping about some painting job he was stuck on. He flicked his cigarette ashes in my coffee cup and kept on bitching until he noticed what he'd done. "'h, man, I'm sorry! Here, I'll put some in mine!" And he dutifully flicked ashes in his own coffee cup. We became friends and I learned he wasn't a disgruntled house painter--he was a disgruntled painter and more often elated than disgruntled. He showed me his work and explained what he was trying to do.



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 education: It didn't seem to prepare you for anything in particular. It was four years of academia, and then what? If not a dead end, it was a diversion at the end of which you still had to learn to do something to make a living.

And yet, my education here was the best possible training I could have had for my future profession. You see, the notion of writing a moving picture is inherently absurd. One doesn't write a picture. One describes a picture. And one thing can be said about a good screenplay: It reads like describing a movie that's already been made. What I needed, then, without even knowing that I needed it, was belief in the idea of that screenplay, one that though impalpable was almost as real as if it were a 120-page document I held in my hand. It wasn't something I needed to invent; it was something I needed to discover and bring from the timeless world of ideas, of Being into the time-fraught world of Becoming, where some mad fool of a director would take it one step further and turn it into a movie.

So Pomona never taught me the so-called nuts and bolts of my profession, of how to write a screenplay--it gave me a way to view the world so I could write a screenplay. My education, and my dear Platonic mentor, Fred Sontag made me realize it wasn't a matter of "you've got to see it to believe it" but you've got to believe it to see it. I guess you'd have to say my education gave me faith, and that is a priceless gift, even a pragmatic one.

So now you are about to go out into the world and your future, as yet unknown. I'd like to leave you with a fragment from a poem an English professor, Edward Weismiller, wrote and read to us back then. It describes a little boy going to bed and waking in the morning to a whole new world--snow had fallen in the night and everything he had known up to then had disappeared under a white blanket. The boy is excited but frightened, "One world being done and I not ready for another."

At that moment, both the past and the future are equally obscure, but hidden just beneath the new fallen snow is still a world with which you are well familiar, filled with the memories of every kind of education you have received here. It's there. Don't let an uncertain future blind you to the importance of your past. Trust your past.

Trust your education, even if what you want to do hasn't been taught yet, or even invented.

About Robert Towne

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 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.