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Oscars flashback: 20 years ago, 'Crash' shocked Jack Nicholson — and the world



Actor Jack Nicholson presents the award for best picture at the 2006 Oscars. (Mark J. Terrill / Associated Press)

By Randee Dawn

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Who says there are no surprises at the Oscars? The event is routinely filled with unexpected winners and controversial decisions. Just [take a look back 20 years ago](#), to March 5, 2006, when the normally unflappable Jack Nicholson was so astonished by reading out the name of the best picture winner his eyebrows nearly shot off his head, and he mouthed, “Whoa.” Here’s a look back at that winner, plus the films and people who took home prizes for director, and adapted and original screenplays.

Best picture crashes into reality



The cast of “Crash” after the film won the Oscar for best picture in 2006. (Mark J. Terrill / Associated Press)

Nicholson’s “whoa” was collectively shared. [“Crash”](#) — an ensemble film about racial divides and intolerance in Los Angeles — triumphed over “Brokeback Mountain,” “Capote,” “Good Night, and Good Luck,” and “Munich” in 2006. None of the nominees had been major box office blockbusters, and in the case of “Crash” controversy had raged over several PGA-credited producers not being permitted to receive a statue. “Crash” creators, stars and producers would be mired in lawsuits for years afterward.

“Crash” also notched several dubious milestones: It was the first best picture winner since 1976’s “Rocky” to earn just three Oscars (of six nominations), and the first since 1981’s “Chariots of Fire” to win no acting awards or director. The film was director Paul Haggis’ first and second Oscar wins (he won for producing and for his original screenplay, a credit he shared with co-writer Bobby Moresco).

Once Nicholson stepped aside, co-producer Cathy Schulman (on her first Oscar nomination and win) took to the stage with Haggis. Schulman did most of the talking, thanking the usual suspects and the academy “for embracing our film about love and about tolerance, about truth.”



MOVIES

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Feb. 13, 2026

Ang Lee doesn’t need to quit anything





Ang Lee accepts the Oscar for best director for his work on “Brokeback Mountain” from actor Tom Hanks. (Chris Carlson / Associated Press)

Often, the director winner is reflected in who wins best picture — but not always. In 2006, all five best picture nominees did pick up director nominations, but this was only the fourth time this had happened since the top category was limited to five films.

Ang Lee became the first person of color to win the director Oscar, for his work on “Brokeback Mountain,” beating out Bennett Miller (“Capote”), George Clooney (“Good Night, and Good Luck”), Steven Spielberg (“Munich”) and Haggis. Lee would go on to win this category again in 2013, for “Life of Pi.”

In accepting the award from presenter Tom Hanks, Lee quoted one of the best known

“Brokeback” lines while staring at the statuette: “Wow, I wish I knew how to quit you.” He said the film’s main characters, Ennis and Jack, “taught all of us who made ‘Brokeback Mountain’ so much about the gay men and women whose love is denied by society,” and went on to thank original story author Annie Proulx, along with adapted screenplay winners Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana. Lee wrapped up by reaching out to his family overseas with a Mandarin phrase that translates as, “Thanks to everyone’s caring thought.”

Writing categories: Déjà vu all over again





Writers Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry accept the Oscar for adapted screenplay for “Brokeback Mountain.” (Mark J. Terrill / Associated Press)

The writing categories mirrored the films spotlighted in picture and director, as Haggis (and co-writer Robert Moresco) picked up their Oscars for original writing on “Crash,” while McMurtry and Ossana won theirs for adapting the “Brokeback” screenplay, accepting the award from Dustin Hoffman.

This was the first win and second nomination for McMurtry (he’d also been nominated in 1972 for adapting his novel “The Last Picture Show” with director Peter Bogdanovich), and a first for Ossana, who was also nominated as a producer on “Brokeback.” This win gave Haggis his first of two Oscar wins (the other came later in the evening for best picture).

Both films went up against strong competition: “Crash” came out on top above “Good Night, and Good Luck” (George Clooney and Grant Heslov) for original screenplay, competing with “Match Point” (Woody Allen), “The Squid and the Whale” (Noah Baumbach) and “Syriana” (Stephen Gaghan).

“Brokeback” won adapted screenplay over “Capote” (Dan Futterman, who’d adapted the book by Gerald Clarke), “The Constant Gardener” (Jeffrey Caine, adapting John le Carré’s novel), “A History of Violence” (Josh Olson, adapting the John Wagner and Vince Locke graphic novel), and “Munich” (Tony Kushner and Eric Roth adapting George Jonas’ book “Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team”).

Haggis accepted the award from Uma Thurman, quoting Bertolt Brecht by saying “art is not a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer in which to shape it. And so I guess this is ours.... [I] just want to thank those people who take big risks in their daily lives when there aren’t cameras rolling and when there aren’t people there to applaud, and the people out there who stand up for peace and justice and against intolerance. So I dedicate this to them.”

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