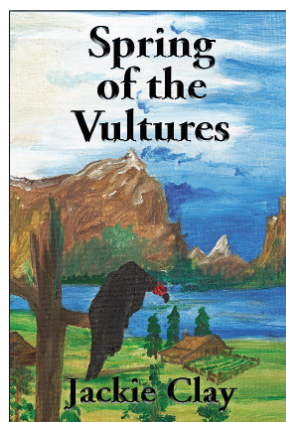
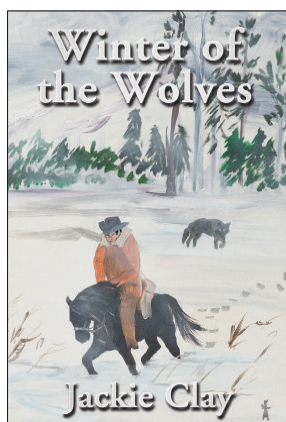
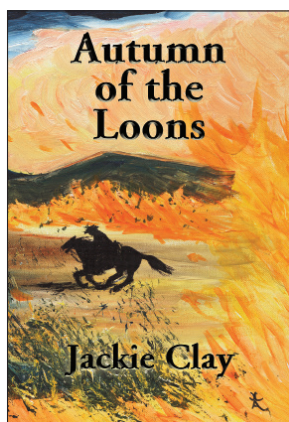
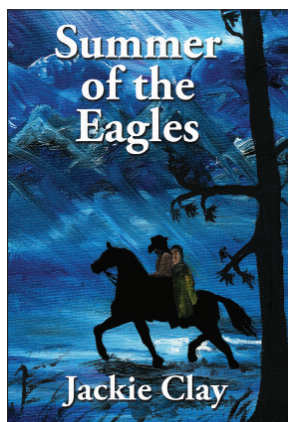


THE JESS HAZZARD CHRONICLES

Jackie Clay's four adventure novels should entertain ardent Western fans

By LAMAR UNDERWOOD



Looking back over the years, it's clear to me now that I was a voracious reader as a teen. The Western novelists I chased down were inspirations provided by libraries and occasional hints from grownups. Names like Zane Grey, Luke Short and Max Brand were common fare. Eventually, that list included Ernest Haycox. Then came a game-changer.

The world tumbled beneath my feet when I read *Hondo* by Louis L'Amour. I read it because I had just seen the movie. And when great talents like John Wayne and Louis L'Amour have you in their clutches, you never really escape. Nor do you wish to.

L'Amour's 89 novels and countless short stories have millions of readers today. And John Wayne's Western mov-

ies have millions of viewers. Their equals in fiction and film do not come along often.

Recently, I found myself pondering today's state of Western fiction when I came across a spate of novels by writer Jackie Clay. Her "Hondo-like" protagonist is Jess Hazzard, who fights his way through immense difficulties in four novels. They are all tied into the seasons, beginning with *Summer of the Eagles*. Then comes *Autumn of the Loons*, followed by *Winter of the Wolves* and the latest, *Spring of the Vultures*. Each is published by Mason Marshall Press in Medford, Massachusetts.

Duke Of Hazzard

I found myself hooked by the first paragraph of the first book, *Summer of the Eagles*.

In it, Clay introduces her leading man, Jess Hazzard: "An eagle screamed as it circled high, a speck in the hazy blue above the Wyoming Territorial Prison in Laramie. Below, the gates swung open just enough to allow a lone man riding a sorrel to pass through. Thin the horse was, but proud, lifting his feet lightly, arching his neck so his chin nearly touched his chest. His golden tail swished at the tenacious flies clinging to the newly scarred prison brand on his left hip. Then he broke into a smooth jog. It was early that summer morning, but already dust rose in little puffs, marking the trail, as the rider made his way to the top of the nearest ridge."

Is Jackie Clay a new Louis L'Amour, going to the top of the batting order of my

Westerns? No, she is not. I honest don't think anybody can accomplish that feat. But she is immensely readable, with an exceptional understanding of story, pacing and characters. Jess Hazzard is a man worth following through these tales.

Jackie Clay has superb credentials for producing these stories, living as she does on a remote homestead in Minnesota with her husband. She has many years of Montana high-country ranching experience behind her, including raising and training Morgan horses. In younger years, she rode bareback broncos in rodeos.

All four of Jackie Clay's novels are worth reading. I highly recommend them. To learn more, visit masonmarshall.com. ☛