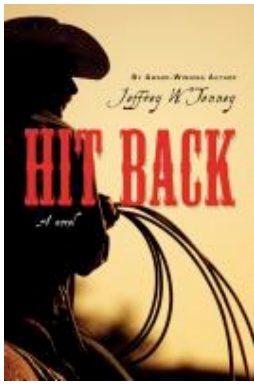
A silhouette of a cowboy wearing a hat, holding a lasso. The lasso is coiled and extends across the lower half of the image. The background is a warm, yellowish-gold gradient.

BY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

# HIT BACK

*A novel*



*Harlen Sims, a bull riding champion, and his friend Jake Pouchot, an Ojibwa Indian, have run afoul of a powerful criminal syndicate operating in Wyoming in the mid 1960s. Agents of this syndicate-a cast of characters ranging from bumbling fools to sharp-minded and highly skilled assassins-pursue them relentlessly across the West. Harlen's and Jake's last hope to put an end to the threat is to "hit back" at their pursuers.*

# Hit Back

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A Novel

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# **HIT Back**

A Novel

**Jeffrey W. Tenney**



To the Rider  
and his trusted Mount





# 1

## Butte

You know, there are only so many people you can piss off and not live another day to see what more might come of it. By the time I rolled into Billings, I decided I had probably reached that number about 200 miles behind me, back in Butte, when I stopped off at the Sportman's Bar to wash the dust out of my throat. A dry, warm, and wind-tossed spring evening had blown half the dirt in that hill country through the open windows of my pickup. To be truthful, though, the choke in my throat was only the handiest excuse for a stopover. A little deeper inside my thick skull was a clear understanding that a drink was due under any circumstances, least of all the weather and the hard drive.

Now, if I had quit at the one beer it takes to do that simple throat-washing, or even at two or three beers, then I would have been on my way still a step or two ahead of all the trouble that was dogging me. But as was my custom—and it was that particular custom that had got me into nearly every mess I ever found myself in—I switched horses halfway through the ride. From tall cool ones to burning shots of J. Beam. Which did little to help me sort out the order of things I needed to attend. Jumping from beer to whiskey is like doubling your bets at the gaming table after your luck has turned bad.

With that first cautionary tale out of the way, allow me to go straight to the other, which had equal influence in this case as to my prospects. In those days, there was a certain type of woman you would find only in the West. By that I mean anywhere between the Kansas line in the east and fifty miles short of the California line. You did not find this woman in California no matter how hard you looked;

she would catch wind of the place fifty miles off and know to turn back on a dime. This woman loved horses more than men, although men did come in second, just ahead of Bonanza the TV show. Any man wearing a rodeo championship belt buckle would find his lap happily occupied by one of those females at any bar he walked into in that wide country. She was big—full-built, they used to say—not in a soft way but in a manner not too off the firmness of the male. Wide hips. Hips always a notch or two wide for the chest, I mean. But this was a *compelling curiosity*, my friend Jake would one day inform me, nothing to wilt a man's interest.

Few of that type of woman stayed married long, for she had the hankering worse than most men. Any man who married one got rode harder and kept poorer than the brokedown stallion out in the barn. So not to worry when all she asked this rodeo cowboy was if I might walk her out back, into the Sportman's parking lot, to have a listen to her pickup. You know, that thumping and rattling noise they make when they can't quite shut down. Same problem I had once she and I started in on the real business. Yeah, the real business all right, but not the real problem, which began later, back in the bar, when I learned from the barman she might be married after all, and that the last guy to take the walk out back with her disappeared that same night. I don't mean he never came around again, I mean his car was found half buried in the channel of the Clark Fork River. Sure he was inside it. Those that found him, the barman said, couldn't get him completely separated from the metal, the impact of plunging off the canyon road being so...I believe he said, "intense."

So that night the Butte gal's husband became the fourth dog in the long line chasing my tail. (Only there wasn't really any husband, as I learned later, but I can't get into that just yet.) I had done well up to that point, as I may have suggested, in keeping plenty of gone between me and the other three dogs. But I had little time to cover my trail with this last one. There were plenty of witnesses at the bar and one or two outside that got a good look at my rusted-out Ford F100 as I sped off.

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Couldn't miss the description, as a year earlier I had built a low-top camper for the back from old, red barn planks. I could fairly hear the offended man's dual quad hot-rod racing up behind me as I beat it down the dark Highway 12, heading west. I could smell his anger and feel his hot breath on the back of my neck. And, like I said, you reach a certain number, and one of them hound dogs, by sheer dumb luck, is going to make the right turn, talk to the right person, pray to the right god, and then you are at once come face-to-face with the Big Stop Sign—you know, the last thing you see in this world. The chase dogs have got the drop on you is what I'm saying, because you are looking into every dark corner and passing car, without any focus, while they got you sitting pretty in the crosshairs.

Before I get on with this story, I got just a few more things to say about that woman. I don't hold it against her. And I mean all women of that type, not just the gal in Butte who happened to leave a mark on this one cowboy. She wasn't the first for me. That type is as much a part of that country as the mustang and the big sky and the rough and dusty roads and the howling wind that never quits. You take it all as one. I loved it. You might say I was married to it all, in a way married to that Butte gal for a moment or two, in a way I believed we both understood. She was moved to it the same as I was, and the same as the beer flows downhill from spigot to glass. *A force of nature*, Jake would sometimes remind me. At least that was how I felt about her at the time. A few days later...well...I would choke on such sentiments if I was made to eat them.

## 2

### Billings

Okay, then, I was somewhere long past worried as I beat it out of Butte. But I wasn't scared dumb. If you were paying attention back there you heard me say that I drove west to make my escape, and I stated most clearly that my destination was Billings, which as you should know is back to the east. You can put it together from there. I wasn't going to stay for long on the highway I rode out of town on. Last place her husband would think to look would be behind him as he gave chase toward Missoula. I made a quick turn to the north, then swung east through Helena. Five hours later I was in Billings, where I'd rodeoed the summer before. The night sky was starless and a few drops of rain were collecting on the windshield. I pulled up there behind the spectator bleachers at the arena to sleep it off.

I thought it was a dream that woke me, but then I heard the tapping on the truck window again, passenger side. I believe my heart went icy cold at that moment. For one of the few times in my life, I hoped it was the cops, there to roust me and set me on my way out of town. It didn't seem possible that her husband could have tracked me, but I feared for that which I hold dearest just the same.

"Open the door," the man said.

All I could see in the eerie dark outside was the outline of a man from the chest up. A big man. Tall, bulky. Long, stringy hair and what looked like a fedora hat framed the face. What the face had in store I could not make out through the rain-spotted window. His head moved back and forth like he was trying to get a better look at me as well. His breath fogged the glass even more.

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"I got five bucks in my pocket and that's all I got in there!" he yelled.

I pulled myself out of my half-reclined position, out from under my blanket, and sat up behind the steering wheel. "What's that supposed to mean?" I answered.

"It means I haven't got a gun. Or a knife, either. It also means I've probably got more money than you've had to your name for a month, so I'm not going to rob you."

I leaned toward the passenger window to try to get a better look, but still couldn't see much. He wiped some of the rain drops from the glass and put his face up close. I flipped on the overhead light and got a passable view.

"How you know I ain't the one who's the robber here?" I said.

He stared at me kind of open-mouthed for a moment. "Well, I have a feeling you're going to get my five dollars anyway," he answered. "No need to rob me for it."

It's a curious thing, but in '66, which was the year I'm talking about here, two men sharing a blanket didn't mean anything uncommon was going on. And no one would have thought there was if they'd seen us. He kept himself, big as he was, and his puny duffel bag to his side of the seat; I kept to mine; and the both of us got through that angus-black May night no harm done. Among other things, I learned I wasn't the only outlaw in town. Seems this man—his name being Jake Pouchot—had got into a fight back in Hayward, Wisconsin and had hit a man so hard his eye popped loose of his head. Looking at Jake, I saw it could be true, as he was as solid made as any man I'd ever seen. I had seen legs on people skinnier than those arms. I learned he had played football at the University of Wisconsin, defensive tackle, and had got a degree there in economics. I had no idea what a degree in economics entitled a man to, but I guessed it wasn't much considering he had only five dollars in his pocket. He said he was Chippewa, off the reservation near Hayward. He had a scar on the side of his neck where his old man had cut him with a knife when he was a boy. The

old Indian killed himself that day, Jake told me, and having a powerful fear of the devil just wanted to take his son over with him to vouch for his general good behavior.

You might have guessed by now that what Jake said about my being broke was the truth. As was my custom, when down to my last few dollars, I spent it on drink, to make sure none of it went to waste. So my deal with Jake was that he could take half of my truck seat and half of my blanket for one night, and I would take half his money. Or, if he didn't want to give me the cash, then we could find us a warm saloon next day and come even on the drinks. It was then, and for the one and only time, Jake lectured me on the evils of drinking to excess. *Excess of anything puts the system out of balance*, he instructed. It later occurred to me that drink has a special power in that regard, running well ahead of all competitors. One beer was the deal he made me. We would use the rest of the cash to put gas in the truck and get down the road.

Now, I might miss my whiskey, but, again, I was never dumb. Getting down the road was bound to put me in better circumstances. Hell, I was a specialist in backdoor disappearances and the white line boogie. But I was used to traveling solo. Not that I minded company. I considered myself to be good company, matter of fact. What I saw in Jake at the beginning was something else, however.

*Taciturn* was the word he used to describe himself. Although he spoke no more than necessary, hardly a day passed that I didn't learn a new word or two out of Jake's mouth, and that first night *taciturn* was the word. He threw out a few others that night I hadn't heard before, but those I never caught up with. I might have said "holding back," or "on the gloomy side," was his nature. But then, from what I supposed at the time, and came to know for certain later, he was not one familiar with law trouble, or any kind of trouble you get from people. For someone raised on an Indian reservation, that might be hard to believe, but somehow he seemed unaffected by the hardships

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in that part of the world. Other than the crime of whipping a man in a fight, Jake's troubles came from inside his head.

Anyway, dawn came up quick and we decided to wait on the beer until we reached Sheridan, down in Wyoming, where I knew a guy who could bunk us for a few days. Before leaving the subject, however, let me put in a thing or two about Billings.

If you take Butte to be the asshole of the great state of Montana, which I did at the time and still do, then you gotta give Billings the brain, at least you did in those days. You might think that the brains in that state would have been in Helena, the capital, where all the politics and most of the law work got done, or in Missoula at the university, but that just shows you don't know Montana. Hardly a thing of a sensible nature happened anywhere in that state, including Billings, but what I'm saying is that Billings was where decisions got made. I spent plenty of time there on the rodeo circuit between 1956 and 1965. I drank with some of the kingpins, all of whom had tons of money and a true love for the sport, and who considered it an honor to keep the bull riding champ's glass full on Saturday night. I heard what they had to say and it sunk in. From then on I knew who was really running things in Montana. And I guessed it was true for most other states as well. For certain it was true in Wyoming. Wyoming was where I picked up dog number two, about six months earlier than where I began this story, after overhearing a couple of those gentlemen of great consequence in a bar in Laramie, talking about a very private matter.

So, was it a smart move for me to head back into Wyoming? No less smart or more dumb than any other destination at that point, considering I had no idea from which direction any of them dogs might be coming. Anyway, Sheridan was damn near a whole state removed from Laramie, which sat farther to the south near the Colorado border. Hell, most of the cowboys I knew in Wyoming, feeling no brotherhood with the university types and business types in

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that southern town, would have run the whole affair like a herd of sick cattle across the state line.



### 3

## Crow Agency

Did I mention dog number one yet? I expect not.

Dog number one was the least of my worries. She was more like a *perturbance*. That being another of Jake's words I took a liking to.

Polly lived at Crow Agency, down the road from Billings but well short of Sheridan, and right along our route on Highway 87. Not far from the site of Custer's Last Stand, which I can now appreciate made a passable *metaphor* of my own previous experiences in that place.

Polly was not my wife, but we had *relations*, you could say. And a kid, which I discovered on my second visit to that little village, a year after the first—the first being the more pleasurable of the two, you can be certain. I came in for the rodeo. Never had a thought of looking up Polly again, but she found me. Not her directly, really, but her three brothers. I came in bold and brassy, ready for any arena bull or town heifer that wanted action. I left just before dawn, crawling away quiet as a blacksnake through bluestem, having spent most of the night digging my way out of the woodshed they had me locked in, with only my pocketknife for the digging. Good thing my hands were as tough as that rock dirt in those days.

Yeah, I got away, but not without wounds. The roughing up the brothers gave me was nothing; I got worse from the bulls. What tore at me was the idea of the little boy back there, a boy without a father, and none but three hard-ass uncles and a cute but biting mother to care for him. I figured he was better off without me around, but I wished him improved circumstances otherwise. For the two years since my last visit, I sent money when I had it, knowing full well that it all went for

beer and parties. But you gotta put some medicine on the wound or it only gets worse.

So I ask you, would Custer have gone back if by some miracle he had been spared his fate? Custer was no genius. Last in his class at West Point, as I recall. So maybe he would have gone back, which only makes the case stronger that I was a fool like him—only worse, since I was on my third visit. Jake and I pulled the truck off the highway there at Crow Agency to spend the last of our money on gas, then cruised down the gravel road to her house. We parked a quarter mile short and sat out there for over an hour, watching for whatever we might see, and Jake saying not a word, like he knew exactly what I was doing.

“What do you think we should do?” I finally asked him.

He didn’t look at me. He rolled down his window, as the sun’s heat was beginning to make itself into a third passenger in the cramped, and none too fragrant, pickup. He lifted his hat off and dropped it over his knee, wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. “Time to start turning over stones, see what we can find,” he said.

What we were likely to find was three brothers even more pissed off than I had left them two years before. But now I had Jake with me. Polly’s kin were all big enough sons-of-bitches, but nothing like Jake Pouchot.

“Okay, say we find a snake underneath the rock,” I said.

“I’m hungry enough to eat snake,” said Jake.

“Eat it?” Well, he was talking metaphorically again. But I still didn’t get his meaning exactly. “Last time I was here they didn’t treat me none too well.”

He scratched the patch of hair that grew like thin shoots of oniongrass on his chin. “These are Indian people out here. These Indians and mine get along fine. Got any tobacco?”

I didn’t smoke. Not even in those days. “No. Not a shred.”

“Then we go back to town and get some,” he said.

“We got no money, either.”

"That little store back there?" He pointed back toward the blacktop, to the dusty shack that sat out there at the intersection with the gravel. "They'll give me credit."

While we were in the store, I asked the counter man who was it lived in the little house down the way, just to make sure the situation hadn't changed. He said, "Down there? That's Yellowtree, though they don't go by that name no more."

"What name they go by, then," I asked.

"Sims," he said.

"What?"

"Sims. You got dirt in your ears, man?"

I heard him all right.

"Why they change their name?" I asked.

He brushed the long black hair out of his eyes and set them hard on me for a moment. His almond skin was too smooth for his coarse features, which could have been sculpted from Black Hills granite. He glanced over at Jake, who was staring at the tobacco pickings down one of the aisles. "I don't know. Maybe the little bitch got knocked up by some dumbass white man and she changed it for the kid," the man said. "Why do you ask me?"

"Don't know nobody else around here," I said, a little meekly.

"You don't know me either." He looked at Jake again. Jake nodded and stepped quickly up to the counter.

"That's a buck fifty for the tobacco," the counter man said to Jake.

"Tomorrow good?" Jake asked.

The man gave me another long look. "I guess so. Leave this one in the car when you bring it by."

Jake nodded and headed out. I was of a mind to ask for more of an explanation from the man—in regard to his sudden dislike of a total stranger, I mean, not in regard to the situation down the road—but I figured I wouldn't get one, so I waited until we reached the truck.

Jake waved me off. "Indian shit," he said. "Don't pay it any mind." He opened the pouch and smelled the tobacco. Nodded. "It'll do."

We were back at the house two minutes later, sitting in the Ford, which we'd parked in the circle of bare ground that went for a front yard rutted with tire tracks and sprinkled with jackrabbit droppings. The wind was blowing out of the west, as it always did in that country, throwing up dust that swirled around the corners of the house. The door to the old woodshed hung open and creaking as it swayed back and forth. The house was in nearly as sorry condition as the shed. Neither gave sign of a painting since the Hoover administration. Shingles, pieces of siding likewise tossing in the wind.

I took the tobacco pouch from Jake—my only peace offering—and left him in the truck. I approached the steps to the porch, ready in an instant to make a retreat if I saw something I didn't like. All seemed quiet, so I tramped up to the front door. I knocked once, heard nothing, knocked again—harder.

No answer. After trying the doorknob, I moved around to a window on the north side and peeked in. The glass was so dirty I couldn't see much, although I thought I saw a small bed that might belong to a kid. I jimmied the window frame a little and it cracked open. I lifted it and crawled inside, and as I did I felt something pull at my shirt from behind. I jerked free and looked back out the window.

"C'mon, Harlen," Jake said, taking hold of my arm. "You trying to get us arrested?"

"Nobody out here gonna see anything," I answered.

Jake looked around at the empty grass and heaps of dusty sagebrush out across the land. He turned loose of me.

"Sides," I said, "I won't be a minute."

"Don't take anything," Jake called in.

Quick-like, I poked my head into each of the four little rooms. They appeared to be lived in right enough. A whole lot cleaner inside than I had expected. Downright orderly—no dirty plates in the sink, no clothes on the floor. Floor tile was shiny clean. Even the bathroom was well beyond anything I was accustomed to. And sure enough there were kid's toys in his room, in a neat row along the wall, mostly

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stuffed animals. I picked up a plastic car that had little dents on its fenders that looked like tooth marks. Put it in my pocket.

I sat down on the bathroom toilet and stared at the tub. Clean like it had never been used. I ran some water and felt it turn hot. I pulled off one of my Lamas and was near knocked back into the wall by the smell. Peeling off the sock was like skinning myself.

"Harlen. You are asking for trouble here," I heard Jake report.

"If you see a squad car, let me know," I said. "Otherwise, I'm gonna be a few minutes yet."

Nothing from Jake. I finished undressing while the water ran. I emptied pockets, looked over my clothes, threw the whole lot into the water and climbed in with them. I must have gone through half that bar of soap before I was done. And about twenty minutes of precious time; for whoever lived there, and I knew who it was, wasn't likely to be away for the week.

The clothes came out cleaner than they had been since I could remember. I wrung them and put them on wet, over my wet skin, put my hat and boots on and sloshed back toward the window, leaving puddles of all sizes behind me.

"Clean it up," I heard Jake say from outside the window. He had a good look at me from where he stood, stooped and peering in.

Yeah, but it wasn't like I was going to be able to hide the fact that I'd been there and used the place. "You bring a mop with you?" I asked.

"Well, you can't leave it like that."

"I got no choice. And you better come use it yourself, 'cause I don't think I can take another mile with you as is."

Jake looked quickly around again. "This is what happens when you knock things out of balance, Harlen." He stared at me, *perturbations* all over his face.

"C'mon," I said. "I'll keep watch."

With all manner of self-doubt and woe, which he wanted me to take full note of, Jake wrangled his six-foot-six bulk through the window opening. He hussled into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

I looked around the boy's room for a minute or two, my heart dancing one moment, aching the next, then slipped back out the window, and for a second everything went dark, as I felt my body take a turn toward the ground like someone had laid a railroad tie across my shoulders.

My mouth full of prickly grass, suddenly what felt like a hand on each shoulder jerked me upright. And there I came face to face with, given my long run of bad luck, exactly what I deserved for thinking for a minute that I could avoid trouble.

Tin Man tossed the two-by-four he had hit me with out onto the side lot. "You got your knife?" he said to one of his brothers.

"No, I ain't," said Darren. "Let's just punch his teeth out and break his legs."

"He ain't got no teeth, I bet," said Tin Man. "None of his own anyway. He's a big-shot bull rider and they all lose their teeth sooner or later."

"Have a look, then," said Darren.

Moss, the third brother, pulled my head back by the hair. Moss was the one I was afraid of. Tin Man and Darren did all the talking in that threesome. Moss did...well, he did what he did, which, although he was the smallest of the three, was seldom a pleasant thing to watch.

Folding back my lips, Tin Man took a good look and said, "They look like real teeth to me." He took a hold and pulled on the uppers.

"You want to hurt him, then do his fingers," Tin Man said, giving up on the teeth. "He can't ride with fingers that don't work no more. I ain't busting mine on his jaw."

"Why not scalp him," Darren suggested. "Take enough off and the face sags down like wet concrete on a bare wall."

"You boys let me know when you're done trying to scare the shit out of me," I put in. "We went through all this the last time."

Moss tightened his grip on my hair. Tin Man gave me a short rib-shot that buckled me a little but my knees held.

"Polly's gonna be here in a minute," said Darren.

Tin Man looked down the road for the dust cloud. I didn't see one, but wished I did.

"Well, let's just kick him around for a few minutes. She can decide what to do with what's left of him when she gets here," said Tin Man. He took me by the belt and dragged me away from the window and past some lawn rubble—an old tire and a rusted swing—and threw me to the ground at the back of the house.

Moss came down with a haymaker across my temple that pretty much took away any chance I had for a rally. The house, shed, and hills went into a spin. I believe Darren and Tin Man went to work on my legs and back, for I had an ugly mess of welts and bruises there the next day, although at the time I felt nothing. Then, suddenly, the fury of motion went still for a second or two. A howl went up, from Darren I believe, and then some kind of hubbub commenced down at ground level near my feet.

"These I got," I heard someone say. "You're on your own with the other one."

I glanced that way and saw Jake sitting on top of Tin Man and Darren, a sly grin on his face as he held the two down by the scruff of their necks. Moss I saw backing off, his eyes big as cake plates as they looked on Jake and the scene with his brothers.

Best I could, I staggered to my feet. I knew I had little chance with the murderous Moss in anything like a fair fight, so I ran at him while he was distracted, hooking my arm across his neck while I swung around behind him and mounted him like a bull. I tightened my hold on his throat and wrapped my legs around his waist and held on.

Moss wasn't the sharpest tool in the kit. He spun, bucked, twisted, heaved, hollered, clawed, and even spit—over his shoulder, trying to get me in the face, I guess. I could have ridden him all day like that. A smarter idiot would have dropped to the ground and rolled over on

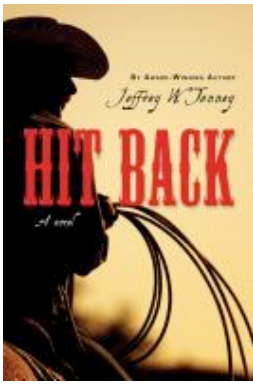
*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

me. But Moss could never see things like that. You could pitch a shovelful of cow shit into his lap and he would study on it for fifteen minutes before deciding it was something not to his liking. He relied on his brothers to speed things up for him.

He tired after a while. Real tired. Staggering tired. At which point I jumped off and chopped him behind the knee with my boot, and down he went. It was then I noticed Jake, standing a few feet away, smiling at me and with a hint of pride in his eyes. Darren and Tin Man lay rolling around in the dirt behind him, groaning, each holding his left shoulder.

"Dislocation is all," said Jake. "They'll survive."





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