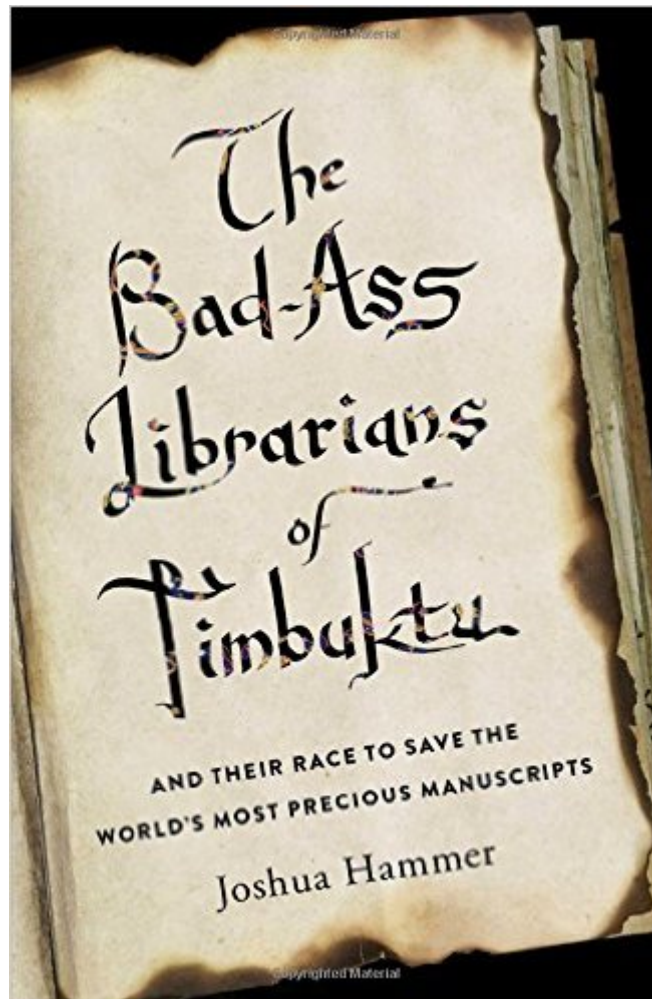


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# The Bad-Ass Librarians Of Timbuktu: And Their Race To Save The World's Most Precious Manuscripts



## Synopsis

To save precious centuries-old Arabic texts from Al Qaeda, a band of librarians in Timbuktu pulls off a brazen heist worthy of Oceanâ€™s Eleven. In the 1980s, a young adventurer and collector for a government library, Abdel Kader Haidara, journeyed across the Sahara Desert and along the Niger River, tracking down and salvaging tens of thousands of ancient Islamic and secular manuscripts that had fallen into obscurity. The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu tells the incredible story of how Haidara, a mild-mannered archivist and historian from the legendary city of Timbuktu, later became one of the worldâ€™s greatest and most brazen smugglers. In 2012, thousands of Al Qaeda militants from northwest Africa seized control of most of Mali, including Timbuktu. They imposed Sharia law, chopped off the hands of accused thieves, stoned to death unmarried couples, and threatened to destroy the great manuscripts. As the militants tightened their control over Timbuktu, Haidara organized a dangerous operation to sneak all 350,000 volumes out of the city to the safety of southern Mali. Over the past twenty years, journalist Joshua Hammer visited Timbuktu numerous times and is uniquely qualified to tell the story of Haidaraâ€™s heroic and ultimately successful effort to outwit Al Qaeda and preserve Maliâ€™s "and the worldâ€™s" literary patrimony. Hammer explores the cityâ€™s manuscript heritage and offers never-before-reported details about the militantsâ€™ march into northwest Africa. But above all, The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu is an inspiring account of the victory of art and literature over extremism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Timbuktu is one of those words that just sounds exotic and interesting - or so I thought when I

discovered it on the globe as a child. That it was an Islamic center of learning in Africa was something I discovered in *Scales of Gold*, a novel in the Niccolo series by Dorothy Dunnett. Her hero ends up there and is caught up in the violence of one of its periodic political upheavals. Then as I read more and more about Islamic history in Africa, the importance of this city was impressed on me. The destruction of such a center of learning and such a repository of books would rival the destruction of Alexandria. I first heard about Joshua Hammer's book as he was interviewed on the PBS Newshour, and I immediately ordered it. I am glad I did because it is a truly amazing story of how a man dedicated to saving the literary and religious heritage of his city and people saved it from destruction by the jihadists sweeping down into Mali to destroy it from Libya. After seeing what cultural destruction was wrought at the hands of jihadists in Afghanistan, there is no doubt that if Al Qaeda of the Islam Maghreb has found these documents they all would have been destroyed. They did destroy what they did find. But one librarian, Abdel Kader Haidara, prevented the destruction of Timbuktu's heritage. My deep thanks to Mr. Hammer for bringing us this story. Now the quibble. I do not know who decides supporting documentation for non-fiction books. The person who decided that one incomplete map, incorrectly identified as a "map of Timbuktu" (it isn't; it's a map of Mali) as the front inside cover would be sufficient was quite wrong. Mali isn't a country that most people know well. It doesn't help much that throughout the entire book Timbuktu is spelled consistently as "Timbuktu", which is the usual spelling, but the map spells it as "Tombouctou". If this is the correct spell, use it. A detailed map w/ all the towns and cities mentioned in this book would have allowed readers to follow the story more easily. And if the consistently and correct and inform us. If the map had rivers on it, we could have followed the path the documents took as they were saved. It also would have been helpful to have had a street map of Timbuktu to see the layout of the building referenced in the story. And some photos of the buildings and people involved would have been useful. I suppose all of this was omitted to save costs and get the book published more quickly. I would have preferred to wait for them. The manuscript on the back inside cover is lovely. But there is absolutely nothing which identifies it other than a generic "manuscript page". That's helpful but not very. The story is told in bits and starts and could have used a better editor to smooth out the narrative. And I have no idea in the world why the title. It was clearly meant to make the book jump of the sales counters. But it is an odd note for a serious story. These may not seem like serious quibbles to other people, but they greatly hampered my enjoyment of this book.

A gripping account which did so much to illuminate my ignorance of the culture and history of this part of Africa. The story - although the events are not fictional - is unforgettable and told with the

pace and excitement of a heist novel - but what the author provides along the way is a riveting insight both into how and why the extremists rose in this area of Africa and an introduction to the vast cultural tradition of Mali. It is a great follow up to the BBC film of 2010 about the Lost Libraries of Timbuktu - the producers of that film could never have imagined the danger facing the collections a few years later and how they would be saved.

Having Worked in libraries my whole life, having studied Library Science as they called it back then, and having been a history teacher to boot, seeing that this book was coming soon was a thrill. It was noted at the end of Joshua Hammer's article in Smithsonian Magazine about a lost civilization in Cambodia that I had recently read. Then the librarian at our local library grabbed me as I came in the door last week and said "I have a book in tech services that's ready for circulation and I want you to get it- quick!" What a coincidence! I was anxious to get started, so I read, as usual, the dust jacket, the acknowledgements and the Epilogue first. Exciting! The beginning of the book had to be a blast of things to come! And then, the reader is thoroughly versed in the history of Mali, Timbuktu in particular, radical Islamists, and many centuries of a great host of participants and attacks and battles on and between each other. Tragedies going back centuries are documented. It is all exhaustingly factual and esoteric, and documented brilliantly. But, the precious documents are mentioned only in passing, truthfully. It was hard to relate much of what he wrote to the manuscripts and "librarians". I kept reading, hoping he would get back to what we were led to believe was the premise for the entire book: "a real life thriller." It rarely happened, and then very disjointedly. Actually, the dust jacket summary, the Prologue and Epilogue would've made a fine Smithsonian article. 3 stars for this one because I'm absolutely in the middle.

I have been knowledgeable about the true events behind this book, having included some of the details in one of my own books published in 2014. It is a remarkable story and one many more people need to be aware of ... because of the historical importance. This book is a true story of major significance and the author has done an outstanding job of introducing it to a wider audience. It really does read more like a 'Dan Brown' thriller than the history of a rare archaeological treasure that has been threatened to be destroyed by fanatical religious extremists. The 'treasure' consists of thousands of long-ago-buried ancient Islamic doctrines, that 'modern' Muslim extremists do NOT want to be publicly revealed because they conflict with their corrupt-modern version of actual Muslim history. It has been said before that often truth is more incredible than fiction. This great read proves that adage entirely.

A masterful piece of reporting by a first-class journalist “couldn’t put it down. It shifts back and forth effortlessly between the history of Timbuktu and its rich tradition of scholarship (about which I knew almost nothing), the recent heroic effort to save its precious manuscripts from the regional Al Qaeda affiliate, character sketches of the leading players, and Mr. Hammer’s first-person experiences as he investigates the story. It had particular resonance for me because although I never got to Mali, I did, many years ago, travel overland in a beat-up Peugeot through the Sahara and neighboring parts of the Sahel, so the scenes he describes evoke vivid memories. Even without those, though, it’s a fascinating book which couldn’t have been easy to research, since in that part of the world information seems elusive and hard facts are rare.

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