



# The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts

By Joshua Hammer

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To save precious centuries-old Arabic texts from Al Qaeda, a band of librarians in Timbuktu pulls off a brazen heist worthy of Ocean'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 world'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 Haidara's heroic and ultimately successful effort to outwit Al Qaeda and preserve Mali's—and the world's—literary patrimony. Hammer explores the city's manuscript heritage and offers never-before-reported details about the militants' 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.

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### Editorial Review

Review

**\*\*New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice\*\***

“This is, simply, a fantastic story, one that has been beautifully told by Josh Hammer, who knows and loves Mali like some farmers know their back forty. At a time of unprecedented cultural destruction taking place across the Muslim world, Abdel Kader Haidara, the savior of Timbuktu's ancient manuscripts and this book's main character, is a true hero. If you are feeling despair about the fate of the world, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is a must-read, and a welcome shot in the arm.” (Jon Lee Anderson, author of *The Fall of Baghdad*)

“[*The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*] has all the elements of a classic adventure novel [and] it is a story that couldn't be more timely. . . . Suffice it to say that [the librarians] earn their “bad ass” sobriquet several times over. Riveting skullduggery, revealing history and current affairs combine in a compelling narrative with a rare happy ending.” (*Seattle Times*)

“*The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* . . . vividly captures the history and strangeness of [Timbuktu] in a fast-paced narrative that gets us behind today's headlines of war and terror. This is part reportage and travelogue . . . part intellectual history, part geopolitical tract and part out-and-out thriller.” (*Washington Post*)

“I've long known that the versatile Joshua Hammer could drop into the midst of a war or political conflict anywhere in the world and make sense of it. But he has outdone himself this time, and found an extraordinary, moving story of a quiet—and successful—act of great bravery in the face of destructive fanaticism.” (Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold's Ghost* and *To End All Wars*)

“Part history, part scholarly adventure story and part journalist survey of the volatile religious politics of the Maghreb region. . . . Hammer writes with verve and expertise.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“A picaresque and mysterious adventure that rushes across the strife-torn landscape of today's Mali, *The Bad-Ass Librarians* tells the unlikely but very real story of a band of bookish heroes from Timbuktu and their desperate race—past dangerous checkpoints, through deserts, and often in the dead of night—to save a culture and a civilization from destruction. Josh Hammer has seen firsthand how ordinary people can respond with extraordinary heroism when faced with evil. He also gives us a dramatic example of what it means to stick with a story; he knows this one from the beginnings in the late 1300s up until the present day, with its extremism and acts of cultural repression and erasure. Hammer has an unerring sense of what matters and his storytelling is impassioned and fun at the same time.” (Amy Wilentz, author of *Farewell, Fred Voodoo*)

“Gripping [and] ultimately moving. . . . History depends on whose stories get told and which books survive; in Timbuktu, thanks to Haidara and his associates, inquiry, humanity, and courage live on in the libraries.” (*Boston Globe*)

“A completely engrossing adventure with a sharp--and prescient--political edge. Josh Hammer, a veteran

correspondent of numerous conflict zones, tells a fascinating story about the quest to save Timbuktu's priceless Islamic writings from the grasp of jihadists. This is an entertaining, and extremely timely, book about the value of art and history and the excesses of religious extremism." (Janet Reitman, author of *Inside Scientology*)

"Hammer has pulled off the truly remarkable here—a book that is both important and a delight to read. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is the wonderfully gripping story of Abdel Kader Haidara and the hundreds of ordinary Malians who, at great personal danger, endeavored to save the ancient fabled manuscripts of Timbuktu from destruction by Islamic jihadists. It is also an inspirational reminder that, even as the forces of barbarism extend their thrall across so much of the Muslim world, there are still those willing to risk everything to preserve civilization. A superb rendering of a story that needs to be told." (Scott Anderson, author of *Lawrence in Arabia*)

"This book is a particularly adventurous and impressive example of the fact that, even with time, water, fire, mold, and termites, humanity remains the greatest threat to books and our literary, historical, and creative heritage." (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

"While the destructive acts of Islamic extremists worldwide capture headlines, countless stories of heroic resistance rarely receive attention. Award-winning journalist Hammer shines a light on one such episode of bravery and defiance. . . . *Bad-Ass Librarians* is a rousing salute to ordinary civilians who make a stand to preserve cultural heritage against all odds." (*Discover Magazine*)

"Hammer tells the dramatic story of how, during the period of Islamist rule, a group of Timbuktu residents saved some 350,000 ancient manuscripts that had resided in the city since its medieval heyday as a great center of learning and scholarship. . . . In addition to weaving a great yarn, Hammer also provides a fascinating history of Timbuktu and its books and a well-informed account of the struggle against Islamist extremism in the Sahel." (*Foreign Affairs Magazine*)

"There are nail-biting moments when everything hangs in the balance [and] one can almost imagine the movie version. . . . Excellent." (*Dallas Morning News*)

"Gripping. . . . *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* tells the tale of how a gutsy collector saved thousands of documents. . . . It was only because of Abdel Kader Haidara and a group of brave librarians that these manuscripts about poetry, music, sex, and science did not end lost in the desert or up in smoke." (*Salon*)

"On one level, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is a thriller that revolves around one long chase scene, as librarian race through the deserts of Mali trying to salvage a trove of precious manuscripts from jihadists hell-bent on their destruction. The stakes in this chase are no less than civilization itself. On another level, Joshua Hammer's book is about a struggle between Islamic ideologies—one jihadist, inflexible and violent, and the other open and intellectual. Joshua Hammer's book could not be more relevant to today's events." (Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing To Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*)

"Hammer crafts a thoughtful history of the Middle East and Africa in a narrative that goes beyond the one- and two-dimensional views that are popular today [and] provides a geopolitical explainer that gives context to the development of radical Islam. . . . The book's title isn't overstated. Haidara, and those who aided him, truly are 'bad-ass.'" (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

"The sources of Timbuktu's vitality—the connections to travel and trade that once made it a meeting place for West Africans and a haven for writing and learning—have been destroyed, and Hammer's book, to its

great credit, makes us see what a loss that is." (*New York Review of Books*)

"Hammer does a service to Haidara and the Islamic faith by providing the illuminating history of these manuscripts, managing to weave the complicated threads of this recent segment of history into a thrilling story." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"[A] vivid, fast-paced narrative. . . . Hammer draws on many—often dangerous—visits to the city and interviews with major players to chronicle the efforts of Abdel Kader Haidara to save priceless literary and historical manuscripts. . . . A chilling portrait of a country under siege and one man's defiance." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"At once a history, caper and thriller." (*The Economist*)

"As precarious and fraught with obstacles as any Hollywood heist. . . . Both a moving story of quiet heroism and a fascinating glimpse into a country little-known in the U.S., *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* will appeal to historians, bibliophiles and those who love a good heist narrative." (*Shelf Awareness*)

"Illuminating reading." (*Booklist*)

"An engaging, well-plotted historical adventure that will appeal to history and book lovers." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*)

"Engrossing. . . . To call this book a page-turner is to diminish it; the suspense that Hammer creates is vital, but it's his shrewd reporting on cultural terrorism--and those who fought against it--that makes *The Bad-Ass Librarians* so important. No book lover should miss it." (*Fine Books & Collections Magazine*)

"Hammer gives the badass librarians of Timbuktu—who outwitted al-Qaeda, saving ancient Arabic texts from being destroyed—their due." (*Vanity Fair*)

"An engrossing tale, complete with a dangerous smuggling operation." (*Bustle (Best Books of April)*)

"[A] powerful narrative. . . . Hammer's clearly written and engaging chronicle of the achievements of Timbuktu, the risks presented to this area, and portraits of several brave and dedicated individuals brings to light an important and unfamiliar story." (*Library Journal*)

"Gripping." (*Houston Chronicle*)

"Hammer exposed my ignorance. Without thinking about it, I had accepted the conventional wisdom . . . but *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* provides irrefutable evidence that culture and learning in Africa were far more advanced than in Europe by the 16th century when Timbuktu flourished as a center of learning." (*Washington Independent Review of Books*)

"Journalist Josh Hammer deftly offers up a string of interconnected tales, ranging from ancient Islamic scholarship to in-fighting in US political circles to French military campaigns and the rise of radical extremists throughout Africa. . . . But always front and center is the fate of these manuscripts and how their very existence puts a lie to the hateful extremism fueling the terrorists who would destroy them. Librarians are always bad-ass but even the most hardcore would have to tip their hats to the brave ones depicted here." (*BookFilter*)

## About the Author

Joshua Hammer was born in New York and graduated from Princeton University with a *cum laude* degree in English literature. He joined the staff of *Newsweek* as a business and media writer in 1988, and between 1992 and 2006 served as a bureau chief and correspondent-at-large on five continents. Hammer is now a contributing editor to *Smithsonian* and *Outside*, a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, and has written for publications including the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Condé Nast Traveler*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Atavist*. He is the author of four nonfiction books, including *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*, and has won numerous journalism awards. Since 2007 he has been based in Berlin, Germany, and continues to travel widely around the world.

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The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu

## Prologue

He shifted nervously in the front passenger seat of the four-wheel-drive vehicle as it approached the southern exit of the city. Down the tarmac road, in the pink light of the desert morning, two gunmen stood beside a checkpoint made from a rope strung across a pair of oil barrels. They were lean men with beards and turbans, Kalashnikov semiautomatic rifles slung over their shoulders. Take a deep breath, he told himself. Smile. Be respectful. He had already been arrested once by the Islamic Police, hauled before a makeshift tribunal, interrogated, and threatened with Shariah punishment. That time he had managed—just barely—to persuade them to set him free. He couldn't count on being lucky a second time.

He cast a glance at the rear compartment. There, covered with blankets, lay five padlocked steamer trunks, each one filled with treasure: hundreds of illuminated manuscripts, including some from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Golden Age of Timbuktu. Encased in goatskin covers with inlaid semiprecious stones, they were gorgeous works composed by the most skillful scribes of the era, fragile pages covered with dense calligraphy and complex geometrical designs in a multitude of colors. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the terrorist group that had seized the north of the country four months earlier, had several times vowed on television and radio to respect them, but few in the city believed their promises. The extremists had declared jihad against anyone and anything that challenged their vision of a pure Islamic society, and these artifacts—treatises about logic, astrology, and medicine, paeans to music, poems idealizing romantic love—represented five hundred years of human joy. They celebrated the sensual and the secular, and they bore the explicit message that humanity, as well as God, was capable of creating beauty. They were monumentally subversive. And there were thousands of manuscripts just like these hidden in safe houses in Timbuktu. Now he and a small team had set out to save them.

The driver stopped at the roadblock. The two Al Qaeda gunmen peered into the car.

“Salaam Aleikum,” he said, with all the equanimity he could muster. Peace be upon you. They were young men, barely out of their teens, but they had dead eyes and the hard, fanatical look of true believers.

“Where are you going?”

“Bamako,” he said, the capital in the south.

The men circled the car, and peered into the back.

Wordlessly they waved him onward.

He exhaled. But they still had another six hundred miles to go.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Anthony Thies:**

What do you consider book? It is just for students as they are still students or this for all people in the world, what best subject for that? Just simply you can be answered for that question above. Every person has various personality and hobby for each and every other. Don't to be forced someone or something that they don't want do that. You must know how great along with important the book *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts*. All type of book is it possible to see on many sources. You can look for the internet sources or other social media.

#### **Tracy Zapata:**

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