

The
Bad-Ass
Librarians
of
Timbuktu.

AND THEIR RACE TO SAVE THE
WORLD'S MOST PRECIOUS MANUSCRIPTS

Joshua Hammer

The title of this book is so irresistible that it's a relief to report "The Bad-Ass Librarians Of Timbuktu" lives up to it. 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 at the heart of it all are books, or more accurately manuscripts. Timbuktu has been a center of learning and knowledge in Africa for more than a thousand years but waves and waves of invaders buried its treasure trove of manuscripts. Locals learned to bury priceless works in a hole in the ground or locked up in a box rather than admit of its existence to outsiders who invariably carted them away. And so literally hundreds of thousands of precious documents showing the range and intellect of scholars in Africa was invisible to the world, manuscripts that demonstrated how Islam could co-exist with scientific exploration, peace, a respect for others and so much more. The hero here is Abdel Kader Haidara, a young man unexpectedly designated as the heir to his family's cache of valuable manuscripts. Reluctantly he is drawn into the world of preservation but soon becomes obsessed. Haidara spends years traveling across the region, armed with hard-won knowledge and money from international foundations. Slowly but surely he convinces people to unearth their treasures and entrust him with those artifacts. Remarkably, he uncovers a seemingly endless flood of material, founds a library in Timbuktu and that is joined by other private libraries, many staffed with experts and boasting of the latest technology for digital capturing and careful restoration. Add in a flowering of musical in Mali that captures the attention of the world and Timbuktu is once again a center of the arts and education. Then an off-shoot of Al Qaeda comes to town when Mali is engulfed by war. After a lifetime of bringing together the fruits of Islamic scholarship in that part of Africa, Haidara realizes he must now risk everything to spirit the manuscripts away from Timbuktu, using bribes and secret caravans of taxis and trucks and boats manned by volunteers risking their lives to keep a treasure of inestimable value from being set on fire by fanatics and lost forever. Hammer tells his story well, with appearances from Henry Louis Gates Jr. to Bono among the unexpected surprises (not to mention my shock over a favorite world music band -- Tinariwen -- and its appearance here). 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. -- Michael Giltz