

Book Review

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

Hammer, Joshua. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016. 278 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4767-7740-5; 978-1-4767-7743-6 (ebook). \$26.00.

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Timbuktu, Mali, is full of surprises.

For a city that has become synonymous in modern culture with being in the middle of nowhere, Timbuktu was once the vibrant, thriving crossroads of the African continent. And contrary to the prevailing historical narrative of a sub-Saharan Africa populated by superstitious, illiterate natives, the city once housed hundreds of universities where students from as far away as the Arabian Peninsula gathered to study and learn.

But perhaps most astonishing is what has lain for centuries buried in the sand, sealed into the mud brick walls of mosques, and hidden in closets and storage rooms across the city—a vast collection of twelfth- through sixteenth-century manuscripts whose historical significance and value would rival that of any collection at a modern museum or manuscript library.

In *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts*, Joshua Hammer turns his journalistic eye towards Timbuktu. He brings readers on a somewhat disjointed journey through the centuries leading into Timbuktu's Golden Age in the 1500s—its fall and subsequent tribal warring and colonial occupation by the French—into the shifting ideological and political tides that opened the door to the 2012 jihadist coup that nearly destabilized the entire nation. This broad sweep of Timbuktu's history is framed by the story of the manuscripts, and in particular the story of Abdel Kader Haidara, the “bad-ass” librarian who masterminded a bold—and dangerous—evacuation plan to keep Timbuktu's treasured manuscripts out of the hands of Al Qaeda's jihadist rebels.

A well-known journalist with a long list of publishing credits and years of experience in Mali, Hammer begins

his book with a great deal of promise—weaving brilliant descriptions of Timbuktu's literary legacy together with Haidara's own experiences in inheriting and building that legacy. But it takes a detour after several chapters into the inner workings of Al Qaeda in Northern Mali. It quickly becomes evident that the focus of the book is not, in fact, the manuscripts or the librarians, but rather a journalistic foray into the political, religious, and military events that led to the jihadist takeover of Timbuktu, their press south towards Bamako, and the eventual intervention of French forces to regain control of the territory. Chapters drag on in a “Who's Who in Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” and long sections of the book fail to include the manuscripts in even a passing mention. But despite the fact that *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* does not live up to its sensational name, the book is not necessarily a wasted read. There are, after all, the treasured manuscripts—hundreds of thousands of them—and the pages that Hammer devotes to the story of the manuscripts' rescue and preservation are worth wading through the rest.

Revered for their content and their aesthetics, the manuscripts are a reflection of Timbuktu's medieval prosperity, wealth, and tolerance. The earliest volumes are written on delicate rag paper, although Timbuktu quickly began importing top-quality paper from Italy for its burgeoning manuscript trade (although Hammer notes that Italian paper watermarked with Christian crosses was a hard sell in the Islamic world). Filled with complex calligraphy, stunning artwork and geometric designs, and intricate illuminations—some with gold leaf—the manuscripts include works from across Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

In shining a light on the rich content preserved in the manuscripts—ranging from Islamic law, to astronomy and advanced math, to medical advice, to infertility remedies, aphrodisiacs, sexual pleasure—Hammer paints a vivid picture of peaceful Islam in Timbuktu that was often in conflict with some of the more dogmatic expressions of religion in the area. Hammer notes, “The confrontation between these two Islamic ideologies—one open and tolerant, the other inflexible and violent—would bedevil Timbuktu over the following five centuries” (ch. 2). This