

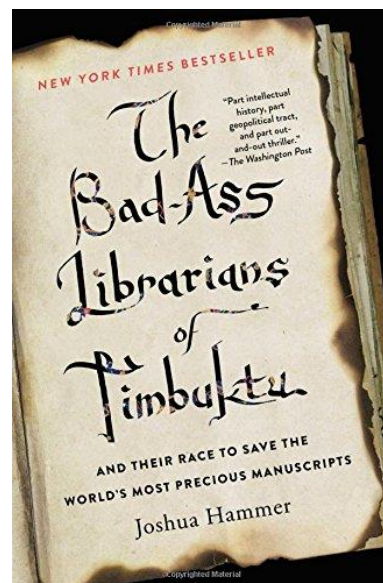
## Feature Articles

### Book Review: *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And their Race to Save the World's most Precious Manuscripts* (by Joshua Hammer)

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- **Hardcover:** [288 pages](#)
- **Publisher:** [Simon & Schuster \(2016\)](#)
- **Language:** [English](#)
- **ISBN:** [9781476777405](#)

Any book purporting to be about bad-ass librarians will catch the attention of those of us who work, or have worked, in libraries. So, with great anticipation, I read the book looking to find out what made the real-life heroes of the story so noteworthy. I was not surprised to find that the protagonists were cultured, dedicated, and overcame immense obstacles to save unique, irreplaceable manuscripts. These courageous professionals put aside real fears of death and physical dismemberment, retribution, and revenge, to take on an incredibly daunting task of saving 377,000 rare manuscripts from 45 libraries, and they did it almost flawlessly, and to great success. I was surprised, however, to find that most of the book was not about these librarians, archivists, and curators, nor about the treasures being protected for preservation and digitization.



Although the book does contain content about these noteworthy efforts, the people involved cannot be considered “bad-ass” in any common understanding of the term, just by saving at-risk print treasures. Indeed, this title is very much in cultural conflict with the underlying premises of a Muslim based literary tradition to be preserved and protected. The author goes to great effort to paint a thorough picture of the vibrant history that led to the creation of these manuscripts throughout the centuries and he outlines the various conquests and invasions that drove sophisticated societies underground and required the manuscripts to become invisible. It is the hiding of these treasures for centuries, that led Europeans to think that natives of Africa were illiterate with no written history. The author is a critic of the “Eurocentric literary canon”, yet he adopts a book title that is very much part of Anglo-American colloquialism and outside the Islamic way of life in which the history takes place.

There is a huge need to share the relatively unknown story of the people, and the invasions and civil wars over the centuries that took place in Mali. This book is an important contribution to sharing that story. So, if you are interested in knowing more about the events, history, and background that led to the modern day need to undertake a “literary salvaging operation in the Sahara”, read on. To find out what makes a librarian bad-ass, you will need to look elsewhere.



