

Kickass Conservators and a Bookish Bonanza

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HAMMER, Joshua. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu and Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016. Hardbound, dust jacket. 278pp. **\$26.00.**

BERGER, Sidney E. *The Dictionary of the Book: A Glossary for Book Collectors, Booksellers, Librarians, and Others.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 4to. Hardbound. xiv, 319pp. Illustrations. **\$125.00.**

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu is one of the great book titles in modern journalistic nonfiction. To sandwich the marketer's nightmare word "Librarian" (picture spinster Mary Bailey locking up the library in *It's a Wonderful Life*) between an edgy, unlikely adjective and an exotic locale most of us could never pinpoint on a map and is just plain fun to say is... well, I tip my hat to the brilliance of the Simon & Schuster editor and her assistants who came up with it. I ask you: Who could walk past this in a bookshop without pausing, chuckling and picking it up?

Joshua Hammer's *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu and Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts* will be eye-opening for those who know little outside the history

Manuscripts, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Winter 2017)

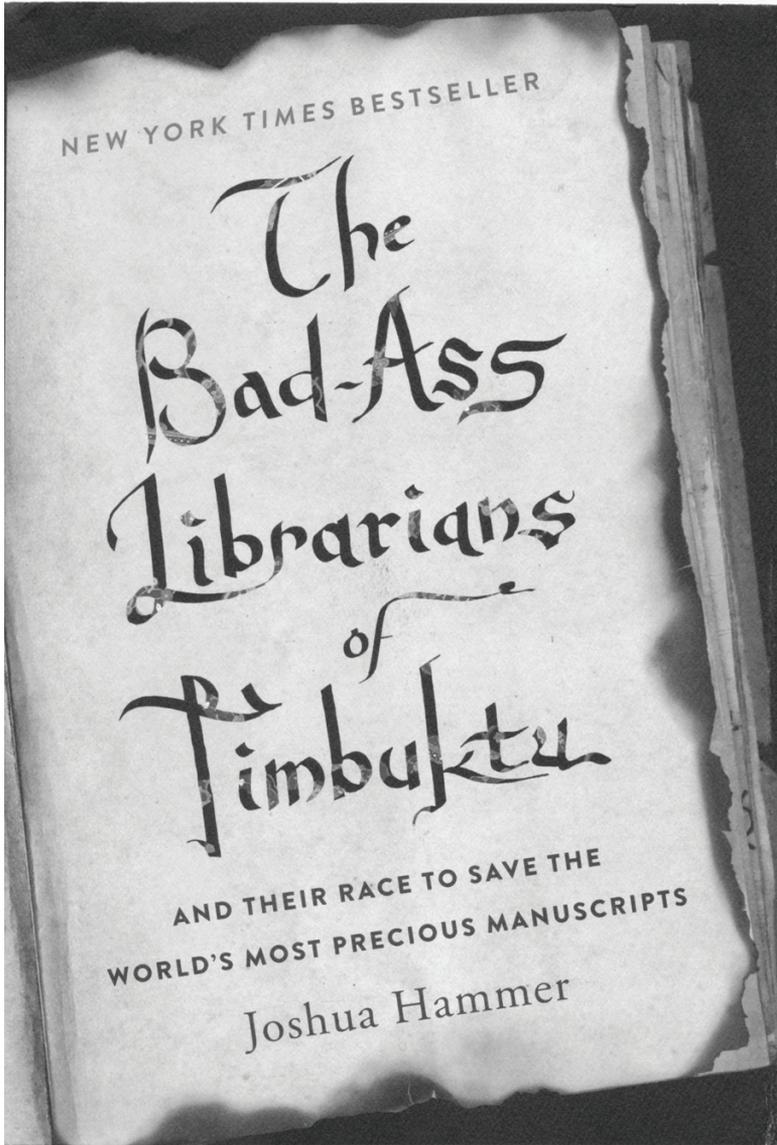
and manuscripts of Western civilization. Mali archivist Abdel Kader Haidara's purchase of thousands of privately-owned ancient manuscripts to house in one repository and later, once Al Qaeda set up camp, orchestrating the hiding of these manuscripts throughout Timbuktu followed by a Biblical-scale manuscript exodus to a safer city hundreds of miles away, is a tale you won't soon forget.

Timbuktu by all accounts was to Africa in the Middle Ages what Florence was to Europe in the Renaissance. Hammer guides us briefly through its tumultuous history, when the city was a center of scholarship and learning and a "thriving cottage industry" for manuscripts in Arabic and many dialects were produced on "algebra, trigonometry, physics, and astronomy" and other diverse subjects. "Great original books... came out of Timbuktu, by a swelling of local scientists, historians, philosophers, and versemakers...."

Anthologies of poems celebrated everything from the Prophet to romantic love to more mundane subjects such as green tea.... The city's legal experts compiled vast scholarship about Islamic jurisprudence.... Timbuktu's astronomers studied the movement of the stars and their relationship to the seasons, accompanying their writings with elaborate charts of the heavens.... Physicians issued instructions on nutrition and described the therapeutic properties of desert plants. Ethicists debated such issues as polygamy, moneylending, and slavery....

This "Golden Age of Timbuktu" extended to the appearance of these manuscripts as well, "prized for their aesthetic splendor as for their subject matter." Scribes and illuminators churned out masterpieces as striking as any Western illuminated manuscripts.

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu challenges the



long-standing Eurocentric viewpoint “that black Africans were illiterates with no history.” It’s extraordinary to realize that “Timbuktu’s manuscripts proved the opposite – that a sophisticated, freethinking society had thrived south of the Sahara at a time when much of Europe was still mired in the Middle Ages.” (I like that Hammer quotes English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper giving the standard company line in 1963 that “Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none.” You may recall that in the early 1980s the World War Two specialist’s reputation was seriously tarnished when he authenticated as unquestionably authentic the bogus Adolf Hitler diaries that Ken Rendell and others proved as blatant forgeries.) Dark continent indeed! The problem was that due to political and military turmoil that followed for centuries this manuscript heritage has been forced underground. “People hid manuscripts all over Mali. They placed them inside leather bags and buried them in holes in their courtyards and gardens, stashed them in abandoned caves in the desert, and sealed doors of their libraries with mud to hide the treasures inside.”

Abdel Kader Haidara grew up in a house overflowing with many thousands of manuscript treasures gathered by his father. He continued the tradition when he became a Malian “Indiana Jones” for the local Ahmed Baba Institute at age 20 in 1984. He spent years traveling by whatever conveyance worked, including canoe and camel, scouring remote villages, gaining villagers’ trust and purchasing ancient manuscripts of every size, subject and condition for the institute. Haidara also dreamed of opening a library someday to preserve and display his own family’s rich, enormous trove – and once journalists began to write about what was happening and academics got involved in spreading the word, the Western world started to comprehend the significance of the work being done. Foundation and humanitarian coffers opened around the world.

Grants and other large sums of money came Haidara's way, and by 2000 the gleaming new Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library opened and became *the* location for important African manuscripts. By 2011 it was "fast becoming one of the world's most innovative manuscript conservation centers."

But behind these salad days evil lurked. A great deal of *Bad-Ass Librarians* – more than I bargained for – is consumed by Hammer's detailed albeit interesting portrayal of the bizarre and bewildering stew of murderous fanatics, ideologues and local independence fighters difficult for us Westerners to absorb. There's a convoluted cast of Bad Guys from many countries with varying extremist beliefs and tongue-twisting names who make Hitler's henchmen look like Boy Scouts and who this reviewer had a hard time keeping straight.

To this intricate jigsaw add American Ambassador Vicki J. Huddleston and "hard-charging" General Chuck Wald, whose shout-first, militaristic tendencies clashed with her diplomatic "advocate of restraint, dialogue, inclusion, and transparency." We learn that the Islamic extremism usually portrayed as a twenty-first century phenomenon actually has roots in the fundamentalist Wahhabi sect of the eighteenth century. We see how Muammar Qaddafi's sudden 2011 toppling jumpstarted the local Tuareg rebels and Al Qaeda (mainly Algerian Arab Islamists) as they plundered Qaddafi's many abandoned arsenals and brought large numbers of weapons to Mali – and we further see their efforts fueled by huge ransoms paid by many European countries for kidnapped citizens. Before we know it Timbuktu is overtaken by Tuareg rebels and Al Qaeda working together, although the local rebels are soon shown the door by their larger and better-armed partners in crime. Suddenly the chilling stage is set: "With the Tuaregs gone, Al Qaeda... now felt free to turn the clocks back fourteen hundred years."

Haidara sees the writing on the wall – mass destruction of all infidel texts and shows of learning – and oversees the

packing of the Haidara Library's 377,000 manuscripts into 2,500 large, heavy trunks gathered surreptitiously from near and far. It's usually accomplished by flashlights in the evening, before curfew, the trunks then squirreled away in dozens of safe houses throughout Timbuktu – truly the stuff of Hollywood films. Even more daring is the separate evacuation of the Ahmed Baba Institute's 24,000 manuscripts ("the greatest treasures of Timbuktu's Golden Age") from under the very noses of the Al Qaeda troops who had set up camp in their new \$8 million-dollar facility. You can just picture the removal of all these trunks later to Bamako more than 600 miles away through rugged, enemy-held terrain on the big screen. The logistics of coordinating an army of four-wheel drive vehicles and a flotilla of boats toward safety were onerous, the cost prohibitive. But the tireless, indefatigable Haidara persevered – often, it seems, at the expense of his wife and children in Timbuktu as he directed operations from the home of his *other* wife (that's right) in Bamako.

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu makes compelling reading, with some players so outlandish if it were fiction you'd criticize Hammer for lack of realistic characters. Like many journalistic books begun as magazine articles reviewed in this column, *Bad-Ass Librarians* does strike me as a bit superficial at times. If you're a manuscript person – librarian, collector, dealer – it shows in the manuscript (as opposed to military or political) portions of the text that Hammer isn't "one of us." He comes across as wide-eyed naïve in showing even a bookish young Haidara becoming an expert at such a complex manuscript heritage after only a one-month "crash course in manuscript history" from a Western scholar living there. True expertise requires many years, even decades, to develop. And when Hammer writes of "one of Haidara's most successful protégé," then proceeds to describe "an old wooden chest in his dank storage room, leafing through yellowing pages and gazing

at elegant Arabic calligraphy and intricate geometric designs” – well, one pauses. He continues:

...but the costs of centuries of neglect were apparent. As I admired the book, the brittle leather broke apart in my hands. Centuries-old pages fluttered from the broken binding and crumbled into fragments. I pored through more volumes in the footlocker, some bloated by moisture; others covered by white or yellow mold. I opened a manuscript on astrology, with annotations carefully handwritten in minute letters in the margins: the ink on most pages had blurred into illegibility. “This one is rotten,” Al Wangari muttered, tossing aside a book on Hadith....

Really?! Is this how a successful protégé takes care of his collection? Does this sound at all like the action of a fledgling librarian or conservator? Hammer’s inexperience with the subject matter makes him susceptible to merely reporting what his interview subjects are telling him rather than gauging and making judgments.

Along the same line is the book’s subtitle, *Their Race to Save the World’s Most Precious Manuscripts*. The “Race” portion I have no issue with -- but “*the World’s Most Precious Manuscripts*”? Hammer simply isn’t qualified to make this assessment. Is it simple marketer’s hyperbole? Of course. You cannot so readily relegate the great manuscripts of the West (and the rest of the world) to second fiddle, especially when the true significance of the Timbuktu manuscripts may not be known and appreciated for many years. The subtitle “*Their Race to Save Manuscripts Among the World’s Most Precious*” may be wordy and downright clunky, but at least it’s accurate and prudent. The remarkably catchy title may be marketing genius, but it disappoints this book person because

it's not really accurate. These aren't librarians in the sense your average American may think, but rather home-trained archivists or *conservators* (hence this review title). That's a rather large difference in *my* book.

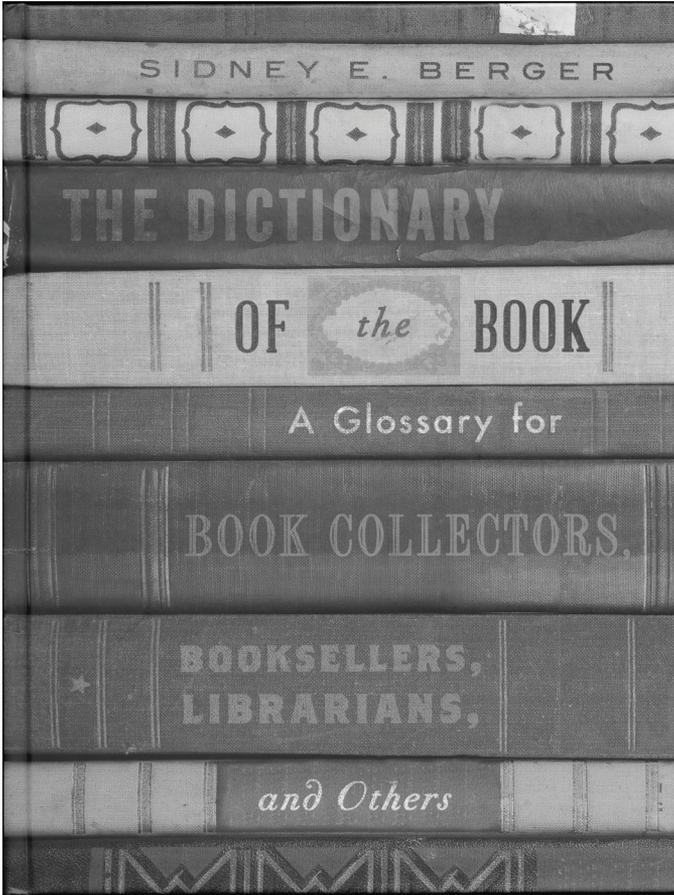
As for illustrations in this tale involving beautiful objects, colorful characters, exotic locations – there are none excepting a map of Mali on the front endpapers and a striking Arabic manuscript on the rear endpaper. Why no photographs of Haidara, the central character around whom the book is centered? Or of Al Qaeda leaders one-eyed Mokhtar Belmokhtar or the short, stooped, bow-legged Abdelhamid Abou Zeid? Why no images of the many breath-taking manuscripts described such as “a twelfth-century Koran written on the parchment of a fish” (you can get parchment from a fish?) or “a tiny, irregularly shaped manuscript that glittered with illuminated blue Arabic letters and droplets of gold”? Where's the spendy complex built to house the Haidara Library and the Ahmet Baba Institute? *Bad-Ass Librarians* is chock full of people, places and objects screaming for illustration and the publisher really dropped the ball in not providing them. The reader shouldn't have to turn to the Internet (where interesting images abound) to discover what the book should include.

But despite griping about these several issues, I found *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* exciting, entertaining and in many ways informative. The historical manuscript aspect seems more lightweight and shallow than the title suggests, sometimes taking a back seat to the political and military actions that take center stage. Admittedly, I'm somewhat a purist and according to my wife a puritan when it comes to all things manuscript. Hammer's investigation, though, is a remarkable story well worth reading. I wouldn't be surprised to see a bowdlerized version of it at a theatre near you someday.

I never thought I'd see the day when I had to make a spot alongside my reference copy of John Carter's *ABC for Book*

Collectors for a worthy successor. Carter's classic, published in 1952 and reprinted many times over the next half century before I reviewed Nicolas Barker's revised, enlarged eighth edition in the Summer 2004 issue of *Manuscripts*, educated generations of book collectors about book lingo. More so than many other specialized pursuits, the book world has an enormous volume of rarified terms that book people use to communicate with each other. Many are commonplace, others so seldom used that even hardcore lifelong bibliophiles don't know them. Carter now has to make room for Sidney E. Berger's impressive *The Dictionary of the Book: A Glossary for Book Collectors, Booksellers, Librarians, and Others*. Call it successor, sequel or companion guide, Berger goes well with Carter.

Berger's *Dictionary of the Book* actually adds hundreds of terms to Carter's original 450. "I have added to the Carter glossary a host of terms that are fairly common in the book trade," he notes. "I have also added numerous terms that are not necessarily in the vocabulary of those dealing with books – but terms that explain a great deal about how books are made and how they got into our hands." Just as vital as his many additions to Carter are those terms in Carter he wisely subtracts. "I have left out of this dictionary a host of Carter's terms that would be met with a blank stare by current booksellers, bibliophiles, collectors, scholars, and others. One might never encounter 'honest copy,' 'chronological obsession,' 'bundles,' or many such locutions....," he writes, and later continues, "Drawer-handle tool; Esteemed; et infra; Even working; Longitudinal labels, Paste action.... Carter was writing for his time and for his particular audience.... Many of the terms he used, current in his day, are no longer the standard parlance of these or any other audiences of today." Berger also adds much-needed illustrations, a feature he found sorely lacking in Carter – hear, hear! This must-read delightful introduction explains well what is and isn't here and shows the mountain of bibliophilic



literature (much of it published post-Carter) that has been studied and consulted over many years to arrive at the 1,300 terms that populate *The Dictionary of the Book*.

Just as the best autograph collectors are fairly bookish, the best book collectors are fairly autographish. Books and autographs go together hand in hand, intricately intertwined in many ways, which is why so many books seemingly about books get attention in this column. Berger is more aware of this than anyone, and in a nod to manuscript people notes, “I

have added a number of terms from the world of manuscripts that augment what Carter has about books from the era of print.” So if you wonder whether Berger may not have enough autograph and manuscript content to seem useful or relevant, fear not. This is the kind of book you pick at odd moments to flip through at random and find yourself putting it down reluctantly two hours later when you realize you missed your dental appointment.

What to say about the almost 300 pages of terms (there are also five useful appendices and a meaty bibliography) that fill *The Dictionary of the Book*? A few random autograph-related observations:

—I didn’t know (but am not surprised) that there exists a word meaning *headless* – “Acephalous” – but had no idea this term, new to me, was applied to books missing their title pages.

—As basic as is the term “Autograph” (“An autograph is a signature”), I’m pleased to note that Berger reminds those who are not book collectors that “in the world of bibliography... the word should be used as an adjective... meaning in the hand (handwriting) of the author” – which he then elaborates at length. This basic distinction is often lost these days.

— “Album,” for instance, is concise and spot-on with its definition as “A book with blank leaves designed for receiving autographs or tipped-in photographs, clippings, or all kinds of ephemera. Some albums, especially those in the nineteenth century, were elaborately bound (often of poor-quality materials) and, though glitzy when they were issued, did not hold up well over time. These volumes sometimes contain the wretched verse of sentimentality and sometimes the signatures of long-forgotten and fairly unknown people and the witticisms of their times, usually lost on (or groaned at) by people today....”

—Impress your geekish friends by referring to another type of autograph album, the “Album Amicorum” – similar to the “Album” defined above, but different:

This is a “friendship album,” similar to a modern-day autograph album, containing inscriptions (q.v.) from friends – often accompanied by art of various kinds and also movable parts like volvelles (q.v.) or tip-ins that can be manipulated. They were first created in the 16th century, and they were popular in the 18th century and later and were often small, landscape-oriented (see Landscape format) volumes. Until the 19th century, the term meant a gathering of short texts from a variety of sources, usually with inscriptions to friends and relatives and often accompanied by watercolor illustrations, tip-ins, calligraphic texts and flourishes, and other artistic embellishments, offered up by the “signers” and usually requested by the albums’ owners....

—“Signature”: While “Autograph” is described as a signature, the “Signature” entry is devoted mainly to its meanings in the bookbinding process, which has nothing to do with “a handwritten name of someone – such as a former owner or donor – somewhere in the book, often on the front endpaper.”

—Entries for “Association Copy” (“A copy of a letter, manuscript, or other kind of material that can be shown to have been in the hands of someone noteworthy”), “Inscribed Copy/Inscription” (“A Copy of a book, pamphlet, illustration, photograph, or other kind of library material signed over to someone with an inscription”) and “Presentation Copy” (“A copy of some item... with someone’s holograph (q.v.) statement on it showing that it was presented by the signer to

some recipient”) all have good discussions that all collectors and even dealers would do well to study. These terms are often seen used incorrectly.

—Wikipedia: Who says book terminology is static? This once frowned-upon reference database “has become an increasingly accurate and all-encompassing reference tool,” although “No article it now contains is immutable....”

Berger’s tone throughout is learned but never stuffy, expert but not showy, urbane and witty and down to earth. He expresses opinions yet manages to avoid sounding opinionated. Whether a rank novice collector or grizzled full-time dealer of many decades’ experience, Berger’s *Dictionary* should prove a boon companion and provide much entertainment, education and even advice.

At one point in the *Dictionary of the Book* Berger comments, “I am sure critics will say, ‘This volume should have included _____,’ and that blank could be filled in with innumerable possibilities, including people and libraries, technical terms and aesthetic movements that appear in typography, scholars who have written about books, and titles of books that would have been valuable to have appeared in the bibliography.” While I confess this comment did spur me on to play “Stump Sidney” and look up a handful of arcane terms (all but one of which were there), I couldn’t find a finger-pointing “Aha!” moment when some standard autograph collecting term couldn’t be found. (By the way, I’m happy to note that Berger presumably intentionally makes no mention of the fairly new and tainted term “flatsigned” to denote a book signed on the flyleaf or title page and not via a tipped-in signature.) More often I found the tables turned and this bibliopole (yes, it’s there) finding many terms missing from *my* mental glossary. So to Berger’s this critic merely bows deeply to him and this fine bibliographic reference tool.