



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu by Joshua Hammer

Summary

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.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of the title of the book? Did you find it off-putting or intriguing?
2. Was this book an easy or difficult read? Why?
3. Can you compare the preservation of music in this story with the preservation of manuscripts?

4. What are your thoughts about how the book covered Al Qaeda and the war versus how much time it spent on saving the manuscripts? Were the passages on war necessary to understand the main theme of the story?
5. What did you know about the history of Timbuktu prior to reading this book?
6. What was your favorite part of the book? What part did you find least interesting?
7. What is your overall takeaway from this book? What will you remember about it a year from now?
8. Has reading this book changed your perspective on Timbuktu, librarians, Al Qaeda, or Islamic history? Has it changed your perspective on something else?

Summary from Goodreads.com