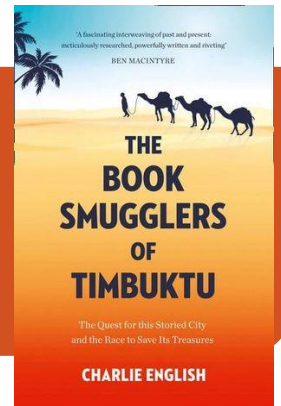




The Book Smugglers of Timbuktu

Charlie English



Author Background

Charlie English is a British journalist and author. His first journalism job was in Peshawar, Pakistan, where he worked in the North-West Frontier Province bureau of an English-language paper called *The News* with the celebrated journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, who later became famous for interviewing Osama Bin Laden. Charlie subsequently worked at the *Independent* before moving to the *Guardian*. He was head of international news at the *Guardian* between 2010 and 2013, a period that coincided with the Arab Spring, the Japanese tsunami, the deaths of Bin Laden and Nelson Mandela and the wars in Libya and Syria, as well as the revelations of Wikileaks and Edward Snowden. His first book, *The Snow Tourist*, was published in 2009 in the UK, US, Germany, Italy, and Korea. He lives in London with his wife and three children.

The Book Smugglers of Timbuktu has also been published under the title *The Storied City*.

Book Summary

"The Book Smugglers of Timbuktu is an exemplary piece of investigative journalism that is also a wonderfully colourful book of history and travel. Above all, it is a work of intellectual honesty that represents narrative non-fiction at its most satisfying and engaging." William Dalrymple

To Westerners, the name 'Timbuktu' long conjured a tantalising paradise, an African El Dorado where even the slaves wore gold. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, a series of explorers gripped by the fever for discovery tried repeatedly to reach the fabled city. But one expedition after another went disastrously awry, succumbing to attack, climate, and disease.

Timbuktu was rich in another way too. A medieval centre of learning, it was home to tens – according to some, hundreds – of thousands of ancient manuscripts, on subjects ranging from religion to poetry, law to history, pharmacology, and astronomy. When al-Qaeda-linked jihadists surged across Mali in 2012, threatening the existence of these precious documents, a remarkable thing happened: a team of librarians and archivists joined forces to spirit the manuscripts into hiding.

Relying on extensive research and firsthand reporting, Charlie English expertly twines these two suspenseful strands into a fascinating account of one of the planet's extraordinary places, and the myths from which it has become inseparable.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ The town Timbuktu conjures exotic images in Westerners' imagination. What did you learn about Timbuktu from reading the book?
- ❖ This book is about the preservation of history. How important is this pursuit in your view?
- ❖ What did you already know about the book's subject before you read it?
- ❖ What questions do you still have?
- ❖ What do you think the author's purpose was in writing this book? What ideas were they trying to get across?
- ❖ What else have you read on this topic, and would you recommend these books to others?
- ❖ What do you think about the author's research? Was it easy to see where the author got their information? Were the sources credible?
- ❖ Do you think that librarians and archivists can be heroes? And if yes, should they wear a cape?

References and further reading

- ❖ Wikipedia entry on Timbuktu: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timbuktu>
- ❖ Publisher Website: <https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9780008126636/the-book-smugglers-of-timbuktu-the-quest-for-this-storied-city-and-the-race-to-save-its-treasures/>
- ❖ The Guardian: William Dalrymple on The Book Smugglers of Timbuktu: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/28/book-smugglers-timbuktu-charlie-english-review>
- ❖ The Reading List: Podcast Interview of Charlie English about *The Book Smugglers of Timbuktu*: <https://readinglist.click/sub/charlie-english-chats-about-his-new-book-the-book-smugglers-of-timbuktu/>
- ❖ Charlie English LinkedIn Profile: <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/charlie-english-412a528>