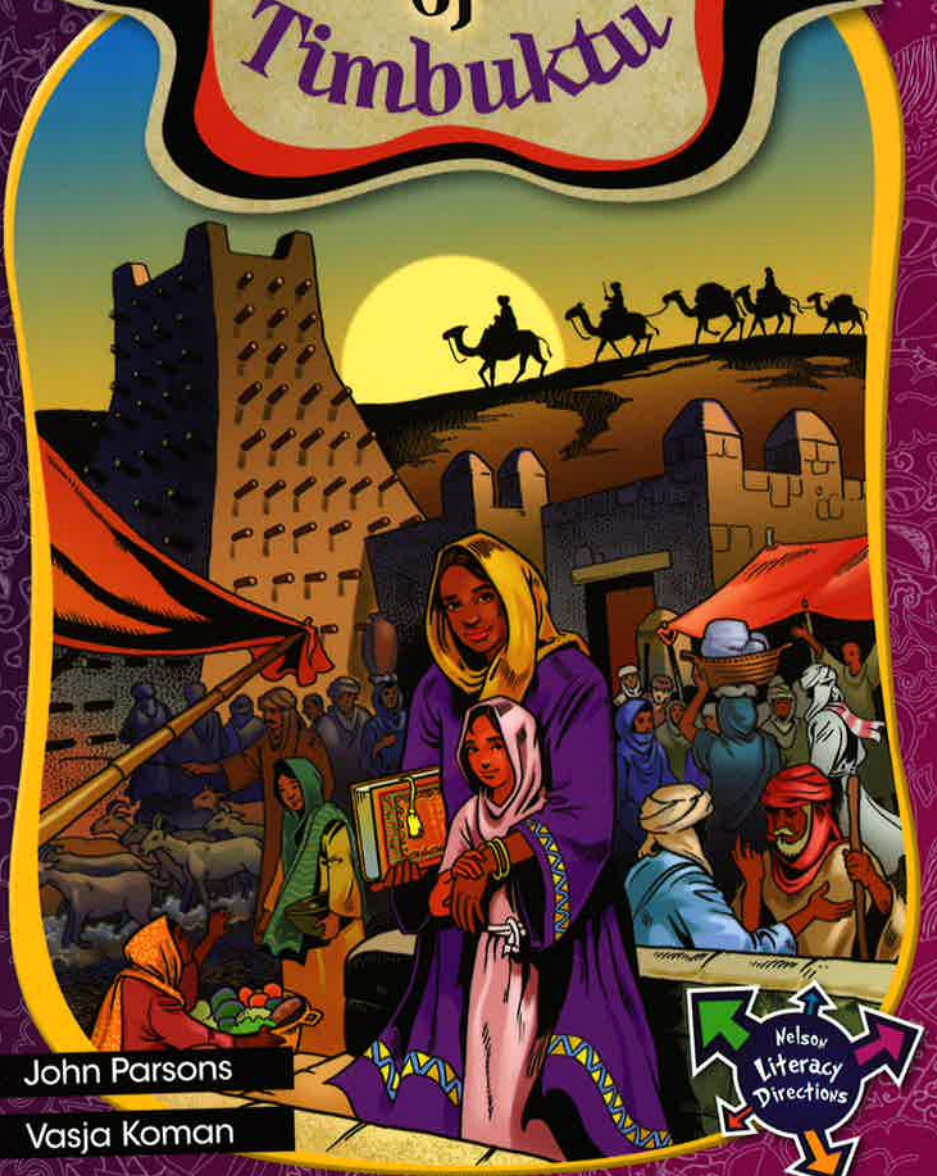
The Bookseller of Timbuktu



John Parsons

Vasja Koman

Nelson Literacy Directions

For teachers' inspection ONLY

The Bookseller of Timbuktu

Written by John Parsons
Illustrated by Vasja Koman

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Meet the Characters

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Kella

A wise bookseller.



Durar

Kella's daughter.



Souma

Kella's uncle.



Hasan Khalif

A kindly scholar.



Ahmed

A travelling bookseller.



Zaheen

Ahmed's son.

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POST CARD

Dear Reader

When I started writing this story, I must tell you it was about something else. But as I wrote, Kella, the main character, became stronger and stronger, and somehow, she made me change my original manuscript to tell her story instead. She is a very persuasive woman, as you will discover in the following pages!

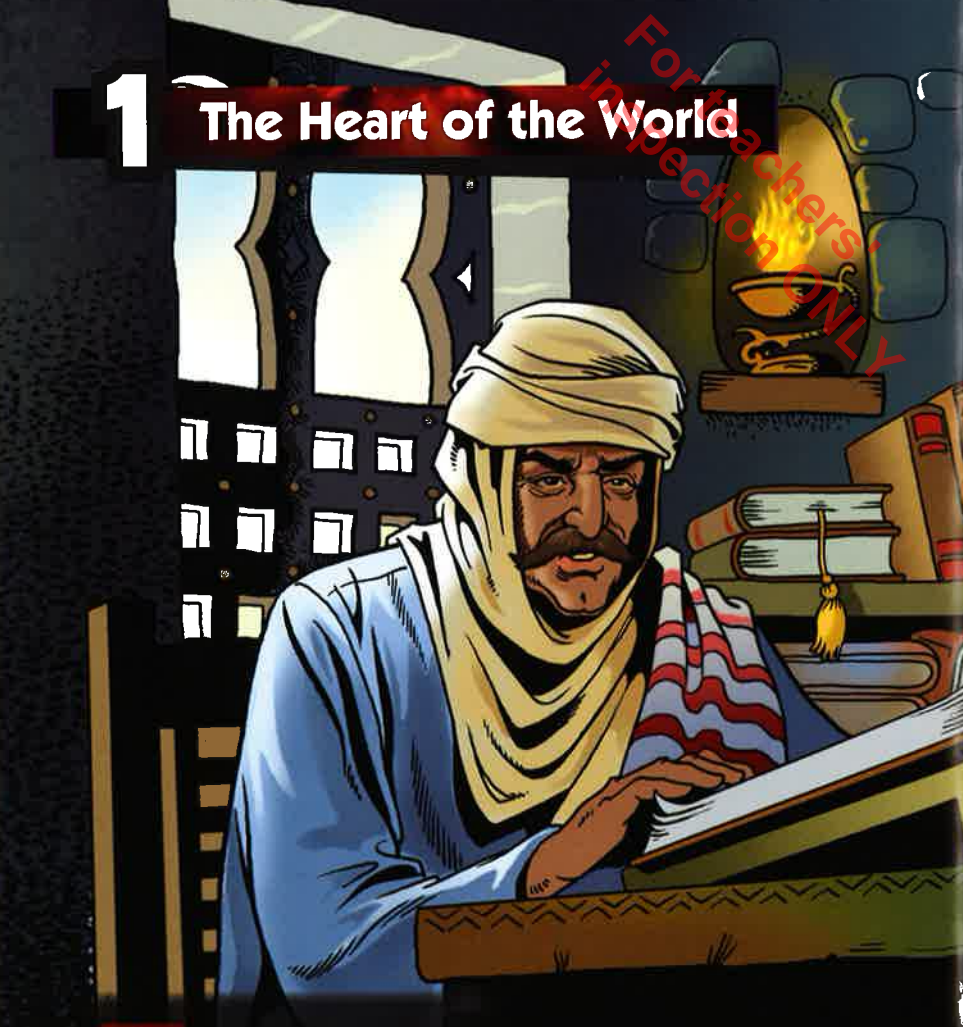
John Parsons
Author

Timbuktu



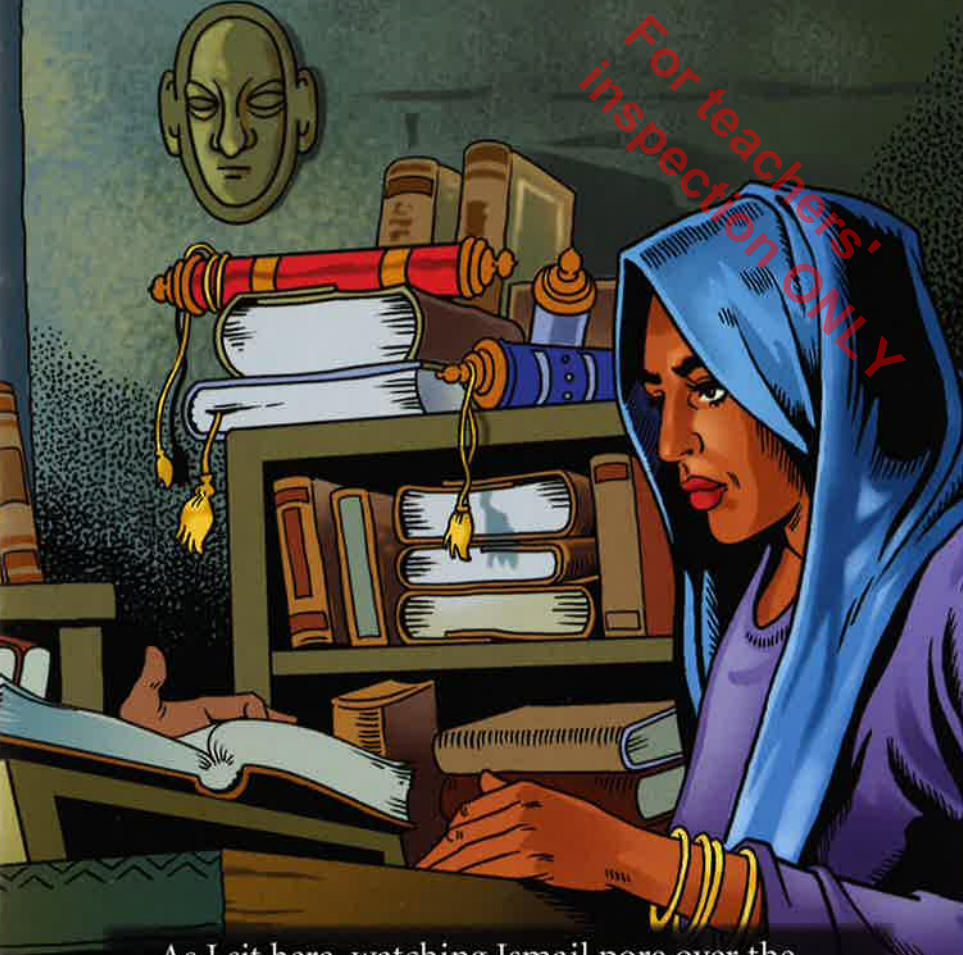
1. Timbuktu
2. The river Niger
3. The Sahara Desert
4. The rainforest
5. Modern-day Mali

1 The Heart of the World



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For some people, when you say "Timbuktu", their imagination conjures up a dreamy picture of a mysterious place at the end of the world. That image is not true. I call Timbuktu home, and I can tell you that we are not at the end of the world. We are at its heart.



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As I sit here, watching Ismail pore over the brittle pages of the scholarly book I have brought him, I can tell from his face we are both thinking the same thing. While I want the gold he keeps hidden within his robes, he wants the knowledge that the pages of my book promise to impart. Both of us wonder what can be half as precious as the things we wish from the other?

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Ismail looks up from his pages and smiles. I know the bargaining is about to begin. Whoever speaks first will give away their position. I stare into Ismail's eyes and stay silent. Before he even begins, Ismail knows he is defeated. There are three *madrasahs*, or schools, which compete to be the centres of enlightenment in our city. Djinguereber, Sidi Yahya and Sankore. There is only one book. I have the upper hand.

"Fifty ducats, Kella," he says finally.

"One hundred and fifty," I reply without blinking.

"Eighty," he sighs. "And not one more."

There is a soft knock at the door and my daughter, Durar, enters.

"Mother, I know you do not wish to be disturbed, but el-Shabeni from Sidi Yahya is waiting outside. He says he is anxious for an audience with you."

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A look of consternation passes over Ismail's brow. He strokes the page of the book before him, as if it were a stray kitten imploring him to find it a good home.

"One hundred and forty," he says, failing to disguise the tone of desperation in his voice.

I nod at Ismail. The deal is done. Eager to leave with his treasure, he burrows deep within his robes, his fingers searching for his purse.

"Tell el-Shabeni I have nothing for him," I order Durar. She leaves without a word, drawing the door silently behind her.

Ismail counts out his gold in fourteen small towers of ten ducats. I take my time to recount it once he has finished. Finally we stand and, without a word, bow our heads to each other.

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After he leaves, clutching his precious volume, Durar reappears in my office.

"Perfect timing," I murmur, without glancing up.

"Mother, you should not trick Ismail like that. That poor man."

I look up at my daughter and smile.

"He is not a poor man, Durar," I say gently. "In Ismail's eyes, he has left richer than when he arrived at our door. In my eyes, we are also richer than when he arrived. What better bargain can be struck?"

Durar nodded. "That much is true. But el-Shabeni was not here," she said.

"He will be tomorrow," I said. "And I will make him wealthier and happier, too."

Here, at the very heart of the world, this is how our wealth and our contentment grow.

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For centuries, our ancestors have travelled to Timbuktu, each of them bearing something that someone else finds more precious. And in the dusty streets, the noisy marketplaces and behind the doors of our city, every one of them trades in hopes, dreams and desires.

