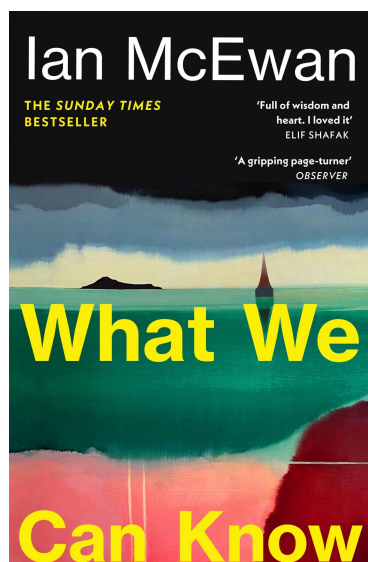


September 2026

What We Can Know by Ian McEwan - The title suggests, to a large extent, the primary theme of the novel - Epistemology, the study of the nature, origins and limits of knowledge. From the point of view of Tom Metcalfe, a humanities academic in England in 2119, we are examining the life and work of a famous poet Francis Blundy who lived 100 years before.



Although Tom has access to just about everything the poet and his colleagues, editors, lovers, wives, rivals ever scribbled, emailed, tweeted, texted, drafted, photographed, published and presented through recovery of the electronic storage of The Cloud, he is the biographer of the reputation of an unfound poem - Corona for Vivian. Tom is desperate to 'find' the poem and attaches his academic reputation to revealing its greatness. As an historian, he is questioning the role of the academic and researcher - should he unfailingly stick to the facts, or create a vitality that indicates the lives of those he is studying?

Part 1, set a hundred years in the future, describes the modest life of this fairly insular academic at a very detailed level, and we all thought it was not very interesting. There are accounts of familiar life challenges such as Tom's relationship with Rose his on again, off again girlfriend/wife and whether to have a child, tussles between academic departments and the cynicism of the students. The educators in our discussion wondered why they were persisting with such an outdated methodology and curriculum.

What we did find interesting are the in passing references to what has happened in the world during the 100 years in between - The Derangement starting with the new dark age from 2022, the first climate war of 2036, nuclear war, fights for water rights, the collapse of the world economy, The Inundation of 2042 and the deaths of 5 billion people, 30 years of climate opportunity, the 3rd Sino-American war, the breakdown of civil society in USA to warlords and large armies of mercenaries and the rise of Nigeria as a world power. Life expectancy is 62 years compared to 80 years in 2014.

So everyday life 100 years from now is quite constrained. England is now an isolated archipelago of islands with limited resources for infrastructure, transport, food and energy supply. Despite casual references to cataclysmic events, he writes in almost excruciating details about daily life -what one reviewer called tonal impassivity. Tom's world view seems very narrow, very Anglo-centric. There is no interest or acknowledgement of other world views, other contributions to culture in spite of his reference to everyone being brown (and we doubted it was possible after only 100 years).

As readers we are invited to look at our present from the point of view of the future. What Tom sees is a curious mixture of sophistication and arrogance, knowledge and disregard for

the limits of resources and inexplicable contradictions such as sunbathing and racism. But many of us found it quite a narrow view and not very insightful.

Part 2 is a complete break. It is the word-for-word account written in 2020 by Vivian of her life during her marriage to Percy, his rapid decline with Alzheimer's disease, her sexual affairs with Harry and Francis, and others. Her confession about Percy's death, life with Francis and what happened to the poem. The tone of the writing is quite different - it is Vivian's voice and although her descriptions of living with and caring for a person with dementia felt very true, she is an unreliable witness and not a particularly sympathetic character.

Overall we mostly felt quite dissatisfied by the book - all the characters except Percy were quite superficial and there was very little reflection on their situations. We did agree he is a wonderful prose writer but the pace was too slow and plodding. It is a thought-provoking read showing a bleak future world but a distinct lack of imagination on McEwan's part.

Ratings: Lesley, Pauline 2.5, Janet, Sandy, Nicola, Margie, Lynda 3, Dianne F 3.4, Hetta 4.

Other Books We Read

Mayflies by Andrew O'Hagan, 3.5
The Help by Kathryn Stockett, 3
Venetian Vespers by John Banville, 3
Ghost Empire by Richard Fidler, 3.5
The Palm House by Gwendoline Riley, 3
Love Forms by Clair Adams, 3.5
Going on and on, why our longevity threatens the future, by Lucinda Holdforth, 4
Eradication by Jonathan Miles, 4
Sophie, standing there by Meg Mason, 3.5
The god of no good by Sita Walker, 3
The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson 5
Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury 4.5
Life after Life by Kat Atkinson 4.5
The Vegetarian by Han Kang 4.5
Dantes Inferno 5
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead by Tom Stoppard 5
Clear by Carys Davies, 4
The Moonstone by Wilkie Collins, 3.5
Whistler by Ann Patchet, 3.5