What We Can Know — 20-Minute Read Summary



The Book in 60 Seconds

Ian McEwan's seventeenth novel, published in 2025, is a literary mystery set a century from now about a poem nobody has ever read. In 2119, England is an archipelago after a climate catastrophe and a nuclear accident known as the Derangement. A scholar named Thomas Metcalfe is obsessed with "A Corona for Vivien," a chain of linked sonnets by the celebrated poet Francis Blundy, supposedly read aloud once at a dinner party in 2014 and never published. No copy exists, yet the poem has become a cult object and an environmental rallying cry. Thomas, who calls himself the biographer of the reputation of an unread poem, investigates with his historian colleague Rose Church, whom he marries — and whose patience his obsession strains. When Vivien's own diary and memoir material surface in the second half of the book, everything Thomas assumed about the poem, the dinner, and the marriage is overturned. The novel is an elegy for a drowned world, a meditation on memory and archives, and a quiet warning about how the future will judge the present.

The Story / Central Argument

The novel moves between two timelines. In 2119, the Bodleian Library has been moved to higher ground, and the University of the South Downs carries on the work of scholarship in a smaller, wetter, more careful country. Thomas Metcalfe's project seems quixotic: to reconstruct the history of a poem that may not survive in any form at all. He chases footnotes, interviews people who claim to remember the dinner party, and sifts through emails and digital fragments — the partial, accidental record that the twenty-first century left behind.

The other timeline is our own recent past: the late 1990s through 2020, culminating in the dinner party of 2014. Here we meet Francis Blundy, the renowned poet, and Vivien, his wife, and their circle of literary friends. McEwan renders this world with the social precision he is known for: the rivalries, the flatteries, the small cruelties and kindnesses that people remember for decades and misremember just as long.

The central argument of the novel is embedded in its title. What we can know is always less than what we want to know. Documents give us traces, not truth. A reputation is a collaborative fiction, built by friends, enemies, critics, spouses, and later generations, each adding a layer. And the people closest to an event are often the last people the official record consults — until, in this novel, one of them finally speaks.

The first half of the book follows Thomas's investigation, and the reader forms theories alongside him. The second half shifts largely to Vivien's perspective. Her account does not merely correct a detail; it reframes the entire story. This summary deliberately keeps the revelation vague, because the pleasure of the novel lies in watching your own certainty collapse. What matters is the structural point: the archive told one story, and the person who was actually there tells another, and neither is complete on its own.

Running through both timelines is the climate thread. The people of 2119 live with the consequences of decisions made in our time. They look back at a dinner party in 2014 — intelligent people drinking wine and talking about poetry while the warnings accumulated — and they judge it, gently and without fury. The novel is not angry at the past. It is sad about it. That sadness, held alongside a measure of forgiveness, is the book's emotional core.

Key Ideas Explained Plainly

Reputation versus truth. Blundy's poem is famous precisely because it is unread. With no text to contradict anyone, every generation can project onto it whatever it needs: environmentalists see a prophetic warning, scholars see a masterpiece, romantics see a love poem. Absence is unfalsifiable. The novel asks what reputations are actually made of, and suggests that the monument is always smoother than the person — no rough edges, no bad days, no embarrassing emails. When we smooth a person into a monument, we lose the person, and we lose the truth about the work, because the work was made by the rough-edged person, not the monument.

Memory and archives versus lived truth. We live in an age that believes in the archive. Because everything is recorded — emails, messages, photographs — we assume the truth must be recoverable. McEwan disagrees. The archive gives you what people chose to write down, what happened to survive, and what someone later decided was worth keeping. An email is a performance: you write differently to your boss than to your best friend, differently when angry than when making peace. A future scholar cannot tell which performance was closest to the truth. And the most important conversation in the novel may be the one that was never written down at all. Memory, meanwhile, edits, flatters, and forgets what is inconvenient. Everyone who attended the dinner party tells it differently.

How the present will be judged by the future. The future timeline is a mirror. The people of 2119 know how the story ends, environmentally speaking, and they look back at us with a mixture of understanding and regret. They understand that the people of 2014 were not monsters — they were distracted, busy, human — and they still wish those people had done more. That combination, forgiveness and regret held together, is a more honest form of judgment than either condemnation or excuse alone. It is also a question addressed directly to the reader: what will the future think of the choices you are making now, while the warnings are already visible?

Climate warning as elegy, not lecture. McEwan does not write a disaster novel. The 2119 world is not a wasteland of warlords; it is quiet, scholarly, and polite, with dinner parties and arguments about poetry. That restraint is deliberate. By showing what survives — libraries, scholarship, conversation — the novel shows what is at stake. The warning is quieter for being set after the disaster, and more moving than a lecture. What we stand to lose is not just coastlines and cities but the whole texture of civilized life.

The value of the humanities in a diminished future. Why, in a shrunken world, does anyone still care about an unpublished poem? Because the humanities are how a civilization remembers itself. When the physical world has been damaged, stories and poems are what remains of who we were. The image of the library carried uphill — books moved to higher ground by people who did not know whether anyone would ever read them again — is the novel's quiet emblem of civilization. The archive is not neutral; it is the result of choices about what mattered enough to save, and those choices shape everything the future can know about us.

Failure and the myth of the great artist. Was Blundy a great artist, or a man who was very good at being seen as a great artist? Was the poem a masterpiece, or was it the idea of a masterpiece that people fell in love with? The novel is skeptical about literary fame. It suggests that the artist himself is almost the least reliable witness to his own myth. There is also a poignant paradox at the heart of Thomas's quest: if he finds the poem, he might destroy the very thing that makes it powerful, because a real text is specific, and specific things can disappoint. Some quests are worth undertaking even when the prize would ruin the quest.

Obsession and its domestic cost. Thomas's quest is genuine, even noble — and it still costs him. His marriage to Rose is one of the novel's most human threads. She is not a long-suffering wife waiting in the wings; she is a historian in her own right, with her own mind and her own skepticism about whether the past can be recovered at all. Their disagreement is intellectual as well as personal: he wants to recover the past, she is more interested in what the desire to recover it reveals about the present. Ideas have domestic consequences in this novel. A worthy obsession can still make you a bad partner.

The ethics of biography. Thomas is not a neutral observer. His career and reputation ride on the poem. If he proves it was a masterpiece, his standing rises; if he proves it was a disappointment, his life's work looks different. The biographer has skin in the game, and so does every historian, and so does every reader telling stories about the people in their own lives. The novel asks, without pointing a finger: how fair were the stories you told about others? Did you tell them because they were true, or because they were good stories?

The corona form as metaphor. A corona is a crown of sonnets, in which the last line of each sonnet becomes the first line of the next, and the whole chain circles back on itself. That form is a perfect metaphor for the novel. Each account hands off to the next account. Each version of the story becomes the starting line of the next version. And the circle closes, but not neatly: a corona returns to its beginning, but you are not the same reader when you get there, because you have heard Vivien, and you cannot unhear her. The form tells you the theme before the plot does. A sonnet is also a small, strict room — fourteen lines — and within those walls poets have said the most intimate things for centuries, mostly about love. So a corona for Vivien is, on its face, a love poem, a husband writing to his wife in the most traditional form there is. But the novel keeps asking whether it was a love poem or a performance of love: written for Vivien, or for the room, for the dinner party, for the reputation? How many of us have performed love, generosity, or wisdom in front of an audience, and wondered later what part of it was real? The novel does not answer that. It lets the question sit, which is braver than answering it.

Judgment and compassion, held together. The future judges the past in this novel, but it also forgives it. The people of 2119 understand that the people of our time were not monsters; they were distracted, busy, and human. And yet understanding is not the same as excusing. The novel holds both thoughts at once: they could have done more, and they were doing the best they could with what they knew and what they cared about. That tension — between judgment and compassion — is where the book lives. It refuses to pick a side. It asks you to hold both, and that is harder, and more honest, than a verdict. It is also the novel's quiet instruction to the reader: judge the past, by all means, but remember that you are someone's past too, and that the future will judge you with the same mixture of understanding and regret.

The record is not the life. The novel's final lesson is also its simplest. The record is not the life. The life is the thing — the dinner party, the marriage, the conversation that was never written down — and the record is just what we carry uphill, hoping it will be enough. Thomas's quest matters not because it recovers the poem but because it honors the impulse to remember. The value is in the carrying, not in the completeness of what is carried. That is why the novel ends not with an answer but with a changed question: not "what happened?" but "what can we know, and what do we do with the knowledge that we cannot know everything?" Learning to live with that gap — between what we want to know and what we can know — is presented not as a defeat but as a kind of wisdom, and perhaps the only honest kind.

How to Approach It

Do not read it as a thriller. There is a mystery and a revelation, but the revelation is a re-understanding, not a twist. Read slowly, and let the archival sections breathe — the detective work is the plot. Pay attention to who is speaking and when; the novel rewards readers who hold two versions of the same event in their heads at once. Do not skip the future sections to get to the past, or vice versa: the book works because the timelines comment on each other, the future judging the past and the past explaining the future, neither complete alone.

It helps to know the form of the poem in advance. A corona is a crown of sonnets, in which the last line of each sonnet becomes the first line of the next, and the whole chain circles back on itself. That form is a metaphor for the novel: each account hands off to the next, each version becomes the starting line of the next version, and the circle closes without closing neatly. You return to the beginning, but you are not the same reader.

A note on the Vivien sections, since they carry so much weight: read them as a voice, not a verdict. Vivien's account changes the picture without completing it, and that is deliberate. McEwan does not replace one authority with another; he adds a missing voice to a chorus that remains incomplete. If you finish the book feeling that you now know the truth, you have probably missed the point. The honest ending is a fuller uncertainty — more voices, more evidence, and a clearer sense of what still cannot be recovered. That fuller uncertainty is the book's gift, and it is worth sitting with for a day or two after you finish, rather than rushing on to the next novel.

Finally, this is a book that rewards a second reading, or at least a slow first one. On a second pass, the early archival scenes read differently: you notice which documents Thomas trusted too quickly, which witnesses he should have doubted, and which small details were pointing, all along, toward Vivien. The novel is constructed so that its first half is a different book once you have read its second half. That is a rare achievement, and it is one reason the book stays with readers after they close it.

This is a book for readers who love Atonement's interest in perspective and misreading, for readers who love literary mysteries and books about books, and for anyone who has ever worried about how they will be remembered. It is not a fast-paced climate thriller or a dystopian adventure, and readers looking for those will be disappointed. Its pleasures are slower: prose, structure, and the gradual collapse of certainty.

Memorable Lines

McEwan's memorable phrases in this novel are quiet rather than showy, and they tend to arrive as definitions that reframe everything around them. Thomas's self-description as the biographer of the reputation of an unread poem is the book's thesis in a single phrase: it tells you that the subject is not the poem but the reputation, not the text but the story told about the text. The novel's title itself functions the same way — a question, not a statement, and a limit, not a promise. Readers will also remember the image of the library moved to higher ground, which the novel never needs to underline: the decision to save the books, made by people who could not know whether anyone would ever read them again, is the book's most hopeful and most heartbreaking image at once.

Fair Criticisms

The most common criticism is about the future world itself. Some readers find 2119 too polite, too measured, for a society that has survived a climate catastrophe and a nuclear accident. If you arrive expecting a gritty survival story — scarcity, conflict, the breakdown of institutions — you will find instead a world of seminars, dinner parties, and careful scholarship. McEwan's defenders would say that restraint is the point: catastrophe does not necessarily end civilization, it shrinks it, and the novel is interested in what survives rather than what collapses. But the criticism is fair on its own terms. A world this composed after this much damage can feel like an evasion, a refusal to imagine the worst, and some readers will feel the novel lets its future off too lightly.

The pacing is a second, related complaint. The archival sections are long. Thomas reads documents, chases footnotes, and interviews people who half-remember things, and for stretches of the book that is essentially all that happens. Readers who want plot momentum will find these passages slow. The counter-argument is that the detective work is the plot, and that the slowness is how McEwan makes you feel what scholarship actually feels like: patient, uncertain, and full of dead ends. But it is a real barrier, and it is worth knowing about before you begin. This is a novel that asks you to enjoy the investigation, not just the solution.

A third criticism concerns the climate element. For most of the book, the environmental warning works as elegy — felt rather than stated, present in the drowned landscape and the moved library rather than in speeches. Occasionally, though, the didactic element becomes visible. There are moments when you can feel the concerned citizen stepping forward and the novelist stepping back, when the scaffolding of the argument shows through the story. It is never a lecture, and McEwan is far too skilled a writer to sermonize outright, but readers sensitive to message fiction may notice the seams.

It is also worth noting, as context rather than criticism, that the novel missed the Booker longlist despite widespread critical praise. That surprised many observers, given McEwan's stature — he won the Booker for Amsterdam in 1998 and was shortlisted for Atonement, Saturday, and others. The omission says less about the book than about how competitive and unpredictable prize culture is, but it is a useful reminder that even a master does not automatically collect the honors, and that a book's absence from a list is not evidence about its quality.

Finally, some readers will find the central mystery's resolution less dramatic than the buildup promises. The revelation, when it comes, is a re-understanding rather than a shock, and readers primed by thrillers may feel underwhelmed. That is a mismatch of expectations rather than a flaw — the novel tells you from the title that it is about the limits of knowledge, not the triumph of detection — but it is worth stating plainly so that readers arrive with the right frame.

Why It's on the List

Barack Obama's annual favorite-books lists have a recognizable taste: beautifully written books that are seriously engaged with the world, that reward attention, and that leave the reader thinking rather than merely entertained. What We Can Know fits that taste exactly. It is a novel about the climate crisis that never feels like homework, a novel about the future that is really about the present, and a novel that trusts its reader enough not to explain its themes but to embody them in a mystery, a marriage, and a poem you never get to read.

It also fits the broader best-of-2025 conversation for a more specific reason: it is the rare climate novel that is not set during the catastrophe but after it. Most climate fiction dramatizes the disaster itself — the storm, the flood, the collapse. McEwan dramatizes the aftermath and the memory, which is a harder and more original thing to do. By setting his story in 2119, he gives the reader the one perspective we cannot have in real life: the perspective of the people who will inherit our choices. That structural choice is what makes the book feel fresh in a crowded field, and it is why critics singled it out even in a year full of strong novels.

There is also the late-career dimension. McEwan has spent decades asking how minds deceive themselves and each other. In Atonement, a child's misreading destroys lives. In Saturday, a man's rationality meets a violent world. In The Children Act, a judge's certainty meets a family's faith. What We Can Know feels like a summing up: an older writer returning to his great theme and asking its most basic version. What can we know, really, about anyone? The answer — less than we think, and more than nothing, and the gap between those two is where fiction lives — is the kind of answer that only a lifetime of writing could produce, and it is why the book resonates beyond its plot.

Finally, the book earns its place because it does something only fiction can do. A nonfiction book about climate change can give you data. A nonfiction book about archives can give you theory. Only a novel can make you feel what it is like to be Thomas, a century from now, holding a fragment of our world in his hands and realizing how much has been lost and how much was never recorded at all. Fiction gives you the feeling, and the feeling is what changes how you act. That is the book's claim on a best-of-the-year list, and it is a strong one.

What to Read Next

If What We Can Know makes you want more McEwan, start with Atonement, his great novel about perspective and the damage a single misreading can do, and the book that most directly shares this novel's DNA. Then try Saturday, a single day in the life of a man trying to be decent in a frightening world, which shares this book's interest in how a rational mind meets an irrational world. For his shorter, sharper work on similar themes, The Children Act is a compact novel about certainty, faith, and judgment.

If the memory theme hooks you, read Julian Barnes's The Sense of an Ending, a short, devastating novel about an old man discovering that his memory of his own youth was self-serving, and that the truth was waiting in someone else's account. It pairs beautifully with McEwan's novel, because both books argue that the person who tells the story first is not necessarily the person who tells it true. Barnes's The Noise of Time, about the composer Shostakovich living under Stalin, explores a related question: how does an artist survive when his reputation is controlled by others?

If the future-history angle hooks you — fiction that imagines how the present will be judged — try Emily St. John Mandel's Station Eleven, which also asks what survives a catastrophe and answers: art, and the people who carry it. For a different take on a drowned England, consider Paul Kingsnorth's The Wake, though it is set a thousand years in the past rather than a hundred years in the future, and its fractured language makes it a much harder read.

For nonfiction, two directions suggest themselves. On archives and how history is made from what survives, any good history of the archive itself will change how you read footnotes forever — you will never again assume that what survived is what mattered. On the climate side, read the reporting and science that underlies McEwan's imagined Derangement, not to check his homework but to feel the weight of the warnings that his characters, like us, lived alongside without fully acting on. The novel's power comes from the gap between knowing and doing, and that gap is documented, in detail, in the real world.

And if you want to stay with the form itself — the sonnet, the corona, the love poem as a public object — read a collection of sonnets with fresh eyes, noticing how much intimacy a strict form can hold, and how easily a private poem becomes a public monument once it leaves the writer's hands. That is, in the end, what happened to Blundy's poem, and what happens to every work of art that outlives its maker. The monument is not the person, and the poem is not the life — but both are, in their incomplete way, how the life survives.