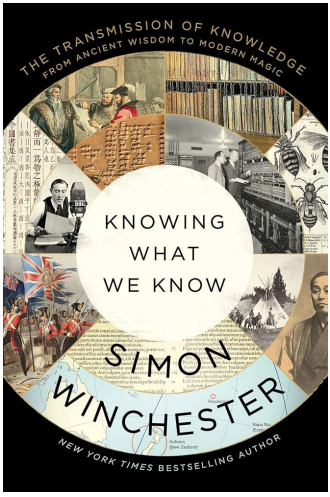
Book Review: *Knowing What We Know* by Simon Winchester

Reviewed by Alyssa Gluf



What is knowledge? How do we gain it, how do we keep and share it, and what do we do with it? Journalist and writer Simon Winchester explores these questions extensively in *Knowing What We Know*, guiding us through the vast history of knowledge-sharing in its many forms through historical (and some personal) anecdotes. Chapter by chapter, he examines different methods of teaching and thinking, inventions that have enhanced our ability to share and gain knowledge, and moments in history that exemplify the ways information can be manipulated to suit various purposes. In the end, the reader is asked to confront how the process of thinking is changing, and what this could mean for our future.

Starting with the question of what knowledge is, *Knowing What We Know* has a lot of ground to cover, from cuneiform on clay tablets to chatGPT-generated "poems". Winchester writes passionately on what knowledge is, how we gain it, how we share it, and how we use it for good or ill, through stories of history's greatest minds and pivotal inventions. There are amusing accounts of people attempting to physically amass all of the knowledge in the world,

juxtaposed with sobering photos of the Vietnam War that changed public opinion on U.S. involvement. Interwoven with these stories are fascinating personal accounts from Winchester's journalist career, including being present for the Bloody Sunday massacre and testifying in court against the false narrative being told by the British army.

Knowing What We Know is a bit of an undertaking to read. History buffs and scholars in general will enjoy the amount of detail and any reader will have an expanded vocabulary by the end of the book. At times, the first half of the book can feel like Winchester truly is trying to go through every bit of knowledge there is, in a way where it isn't easy to tell where things are going. At one point the reader is shown a long list of different newspaper names and at another point, we are told step-by-step how to find a boat's exact position on the sea without a GPS.

The latter half of the book becomes more engrossing as it explores the moral complications of how we frame the knowledge we share. The stories of Winchester's personal experiences are particularly compelling and bring a more personal feel to the otherwise very academic writing. Elements like tales of watching a woman start a free school in a poverty-stricken town in India, or of speaking to a Chinese student who did not know about the Tiananmen Square massacre, enhance the book's points by showing the small-scale, every day effects of how knowledge is transmitted. The book's final analysis on whether or not AI removes the need for us to think for ourselves leaves the reader examining their own thoughts in what feels like a fitting, satisfying end to a book about thinking.

Through the stories it tells, *Knowing What We Know* shines a spotlight on the ethical issues that arise when people teach, inform, and interpret. Knowledge is often kept and controlled by those in positions of power–mainly white men or government leaders, as Winchester points out. Governments can wipe incidents like the Tiananmen Square massacre from generational memory, while journalists on the ground can wrest the control of truth from any one particular narrative by publishing a photo. Knowledge is how we learn from the past, but Winchester shows how easily it can be shaped if we are not careful enough to examine for ourselves. Now, in a world where we rely on machines to gather information and deposit it at our feet, it is more important than ever to be aware of the filters through which we are told about the world.