



The Knowledge: How to Rebuild Civilization in the Aftermath of a Cataclysm

By Lewis Dartnell

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How would you go about rebuilding a technological society from scratch?

If our technological society collapsed tomorrow what would be the one book you would want to press into the hands of the postapocalyptic survivors? What crucial knowledge would they need to survive in the immediate aftermath and to rebuild civilization as quickly as possible?

Human knowledge is collective, distributed across the population. It has built on itself for centuries, becoming vast and increasingly specialized. Most of us are ignorant about the fundamental principles of the civilization that supports us, happily utilizing the latest—or even the most basic—technology without having the slightest idea of why it works or how it came to be. If you had to go back to absolute basics, like some sort of postcataclysmic Robinson Crusoe, would you know how to re-create an internal combustion engine, put together a microscope, get metals out of rock, or even how to produce food for yourself?

Lewis Dartnell proposes that the key to preserving civilization in an apocalyptic scenario is to provide a quickstart guide, adapted to cataclysmic circumstances. *The Knowledge* describes many of the modern technologies we employ, but first it explains the fundamentals upon which they are built. Every piece of technology rests on an enormous support network of other technologies, all interlinked and mutually dependent. You can't hope to build a radio, for example, without understanding how to acquire the raw materials it requires, as well as generate the electricity needed to run it. But Dartnell doesn't just provide specific information for starting over; he also reveals the greatest invention of them all—the phenomenal knowledge-generating machine that is the scientific method itself.

The Knowledge is a brilliantly original guide to the fundamentals of science and how it built our modern world.

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- Sales Rank: #25945 in Books
- Brand: Penguin Books
- Published on: 2015-03-10
- Released on: 2015-03-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.40" h x .70" w x 5.50" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback

- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Dartnell, a UK Space Agency research fellow and award-winning science writer, specializes in the field of astrobiology, including how microorganisms could survive on Mars. It's no wonder, then, that this renowned young scientist is fascinated by survival tactics, the underlying theme of this ambitious inquiry into how people might be able to rebuild the world as we know it if an apocalypse came to pass. As much as any writer could cover the history of technology in 300 pages, Dartnell presents a good case. His account quickly progresses from raising crops to making soap, shearing and spinning wool, mining coal, generating electricity, and building radios. Of course, since this is all speculation, it's hard to predict what people would be able to scavenge and what will be left intact or who might be on earth besides yourself. Dartnell doesn't address questions of governing this survivors' society or how people would collaborate on rebuilding or how hopeless some will feel without Google and smartphones. Still, Dartnell's vision is a great start in understanding what it took to build our world. --Laurie Borman

Review

Wall Street Journal:

““The Knowledge” is a fascinating look at the basic principles of the most important technologies undergirding modern society... a fun read full of optimism about human ingenuity.”

Boston Globe:

“[Dartnell's] plans may anticipate the destruction of our world, but embedded in them is the hope that there might be a better way to live in the pre-apocalyptic world we inhabit right now.”

New York Post:

“A stimulating read, a grand thought experiment on re-engineering the food, housing, clothing, heat, clean water and every other building block of civilization.”

Booklist:

“Dartnell's vision is a great start in understanding what it took to build our world.”

The Times:

“This book is an extraordinary achievement. With lucidity and brevity, Dartnell explains the rudiments of a civilisation. It is a great read even if civilisation does not collapse. If it does, it will be the sacred text of the new world — Dartnell that world's first great prophet.”

The Independent:

“The Knowledge is premised on an ingenious sleight of hand. Ostensibly a manual on rebuilding our technological life-support system after a global catastrophe, it is actually a glorious compendium of the knowledge we have lost in the living; the origins of the material fabric of our actual, unapocalyptic lives....The most inspiring book I've read in a long time.”

The Guardian:

“The Knowledge is a terrifically engrossing history of science and technology.... [A] cunningly packaged yet entertainingly serious essay in the history of practical ideas.”

Times Higher Education:

“A whirlwind tour of the history of human endeavour in terms of scientific and technological discovery.... Readers will certainly come away better informed, more knowledgeable about, and hopefully more interested in the fundamental science and technology necessary to rebuild a civilised society.”

The Daily Mail:

“Dartnell’s guide to surviving the apocalypse is as breezy and engaging as it is informative. I now know exactly what I’m going to do as soon as a mushroom cloud appears on the horizon. Leap in my golf cart and go straight round to Dartnell’s place.”

The Observer:

“A crash course in the scientific fundamentals underpinning modern-day living. The Knowledge impresses as a condensed history of scientific progress, and will pique curiosity among readers who regret daydreaming throughout school chemistry lessons.”

New Statesman:

“A crash course in the scientific fundamentals underpinning modern-day living. The Knowledge impresses as a condensed history of scientific progress, and will pique curiosity among readers who regret daydreaming throughout school chemistry lessons.”

Nature:

“The ultimate do-it-yourself guide to ‘rebooting’ human civilization. With scientific nous, Dartnell depicts probable environmental scenarios on a stricken Earth and offers putative survivors instruction in the technologies needed to craft a culture from the ground up. Many will thrill to this reminder of our species’ prodigious resilience.”

Seth Mnookin, New York Times bestselling author of *The Panic Virus* and associate director of MIT's Graduate Program in Science Writing:

“A marvelously astounding work: In one graceful swoop, Lewis Dartnell takes our multi-layered, interconnected modern world, shows how fragile its scaffolding is, and then lays out a how-to guide for starting over from scratch. Imagine *Zombieland* told by Neil deGrasse Tyson and you'll get some sense of what a delight *The Knowledge* is to read.”

Ken MacLeod, author of *Intrusion and Descent*:

“Dartnell makes the technology and science of everyday life in our civilization fascinating and understandable. This book may or may not save your life but it'll certainly make it more interesting. This is the book we all wish we'd been given at school: the knowledge that makes everything else make sense.”

Roger Highfield, journalist, author, and Science Museum executive:

“For all those terrified by runaway climate change, super-eruptions, planet-killer asteroids, doomsday viruses, nuclear terrorism and absolute domination by super-intelligent machines, Lewis Dartnell has written a long-overdue guide to what you should do after the apocalypse: an illuminating and entertaining vision of how to reboot life, civilization and everything. Dartnell’s vision of the survival of the smartest in a post-apocalyptic world offers a remarkable and panoramic view of how civilization actually works.”

S. M. Stirling, New York Times bestselling author of *The Given Sacrifice*:

“This book is useful if civilization collapses, and entertaining if it doesn't. After the cometary impact it may save your life, and if it doesn't at least you'll know why you perished.”

About the Author

Dr. Lewis Dartnell is a UK Space Agency research fellow at the University of Leicester and writes regularly for *New Scientist*, *BBC Focus*, *BBC Sky at Night*, *Cosmos*, as well as newspapers including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. He has won several awards, including the *Daily Telegraph* Young Science Writer Award. He also makes regular TV appearances and has been featured on *BBC Horizon*, *Stargazing Live*, *Sky at Night*, and numerous times on Discovery and the Science channel. His scientific research is in the field of astrobiology he works on how microorganisms might survive on the surface of Mars and the best ways to detect signs of ancient Martian life. He is thirty-two years old.

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