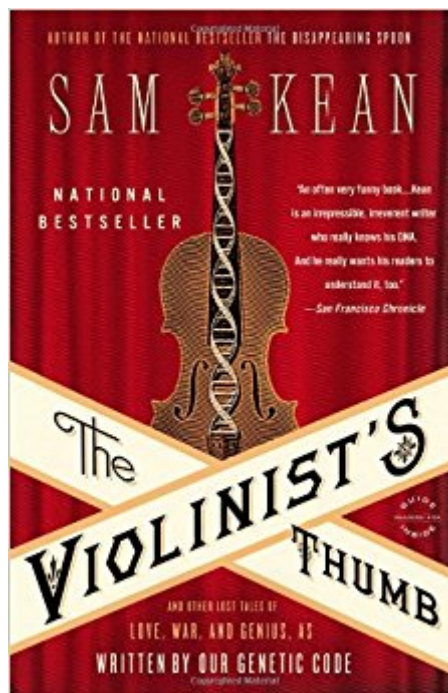




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# The Violinist's Thumb: And Other Lost Tales Of Love, War, And Genius, As Written By Our Genetic Code



## Synopsis

From New York Times bestselling author Sam Kean comes incredible stories of science, history, language, and music, as told by our own DNA. In *The Disappearing Spoon*, bestselling author Sam Kean unlocked the mysteries of the periodic table. In *THE VIOLINIST'S THUMB*, he explores the wonders of the magical building block of life: DNA. There are genes to explain crazy cat ladies, why other people have no fingerprints, and why some people survive nuclear bombs. Genes illuminate everything from JFK's bronze skin (it wasn't a tan) to Einstein's genius. They prove that Neanderthals and humans bred thousands of years more recently than any of us would feel comfortable thinking. They can even allow some people, because of the exceptional flexibility of their thumbs and fingers, to become truly singular violinists. Kean's vibrant storytelling once again makes science entertaining, explaining human history and whimsy while showing how DNA will influence our species' future.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, July 2012: Born to parents named Gene and Jean, Sam Kean got enough ribbing in school science classes to develop an early aversion to genetics. Lucky for us, curiosity overcame conditioning as he became increasingly fascinated with the role DNA plays in shaping destiny. As he did in *The Disappearing Spoon*, a captivating chronicle of human interactions with each periodic element, Kean has created another page-turning scientific history in *The Violinist's Thumb*. With fluid gusto, he turns the discovery of DNA into riveting human drama, then unfurls a

series of anecdotes that expand our understanding of genetic influence on our lives as (sometimes uniquely gifted) individuals, from presidents to physicists to violin virtuosos with exceptionally dexterous digits. Kean illuminates clues embedded in our genes that help map the meandering trajectory of our species, then leaves readers with the distinct impression that all this has been a fantastic preamble to our species's most thrilling (and likely chilling) chapter: manipulating our DNA to remake future humans, and all life on Earth. --Mari Malcolm --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"As he did in his debut bestseller, *The Disappearing Spoon*, Sam Kean educates readers about a facet of science with wonderfully witty prose and enthralling anecdotes....Kean's thoughtful, humorous book is a joy to read." -- Publishers Weekly  
"A science journalist with a flair for words...[Kean's] language is fluid and accessible, even for the science-challenged." -- Barbara Hoffert, *Library Journal*  
"Kean is one of America's smartest and most charming science writers, and his new book could be perfect for summer readers who prefer some substance with their fun." -- Michael Schaub, *National Public Radio*  
"The DNA molecule, Kean asserts, is the 'grand narrative of human existence'-and he boldly sets out to tell the tale, not only explaining genetics and its scientific history but linking Mendel's pea shoots to the evolution of early humans....He's crafted a lively read packed with unforgettable details." -- Sarah Zhang, *Discover*  
"Sam Kean is the best science teacher you never had... a slew of intriguing tales, which Kean spins in light, witty prose while also placing them in a broader scientific context." -- Keith Staskiewicz, *Entertainment Weekly*  
"Sam Kean has started to make a habit of taking scientific subjects that inhabit the outskirts of the popular imagination and reintroducing them with healthy doses of history and humanity....Anyone reading this fine book could be excused for jolting upright...with wide-eyed amazement." -- Jesse Singal, *Boston Globe*  
"[Kean] writes with a humor and humanity that make him poised to become the next Brian Greene, maybe, or Oliver Sacks-explaining small corners of the universe one case study at a time." -- Monica Hesse, *Washington Post*  
"The *Violinist's Thumb* delivers the same humor and insight--and delightful anecdotes--about DNA that Kean used to make the periodic table of the elements entertaining in his New York Times bestselling debut *The Disappearing Spoon*." -- Brooklyn Daily Eagle

We're all hearing a lot about DNA research and new genetic discoveries these days, but most of us probably have little to no idea of what it all means and what it entails for ourselves. If you want to learn more about the subject but have bad memories of dry as dust high school science textbooks,

fear not, *The Violinist's Thumb* is an excellent resource. The title refers to the musician and composer Paganini, who was able to stretch and flex his fingers far more than most of us, and thus was able to perform extremely complex compositions. His story is just one of many enjoyable anecdotes scattered throughout *The Violinist's Thumb* that all illustrate various aspects of DNA and genes. Sam Kean has a great sense of humor and he uses it to render what might be mind numbingly complex descriptions of DNA strands enjoyable and fun. He is a master of the witty aside and the written versions of the sly elbow nudge and the sneaky wink. Do not mistake Kean's levity for lightmindedness. *The Violinist's Thumb* is an excellent overview of the history of DNA and genetic research, and while the anecdotes might make you laugh they also illustrate various aspects of that history. Most interestingly, Kean provides some intriguing speculations as to the future of that research and its implications for us all. I recommend *The Violinist's Thumb* as an invaluable resource for anyone, whether scientist or layman, seeking a better understanding of this fast developing field.

Two books for the price of one is a good deal, but when both books are engaging, it's a great deal. Sam Kean's volume can conveniently be divided into a first half that's an exposition of what we know about DNA and genetics, and a second half devoted to how this science has played out in prehistory, historical eras, and the lives of individuals. A strong science background makes it easier to understand the first half of the book. Unfortunately, I don't have one. My last formal encounter with a science course occurred forty-eight years ago, when I took Astronomy. (Or maybe it was Astrology. It was the '60s. I don't remember), and I barely passed. In spite of this spectacular ignorance, Kean managed, by sheer verbal firepower, to actually teach me a little about DNA. I think he figured that the subject was difficult enough, so let's make the language clear and direct. He did good. When Kean turns to explaining how this science can help us better understand the past, and even some specific personages, I picked up the pace. I have to be honest: when most scientists try to write history, they usually produce the raw material for a compost pile. Kean beats the odds. Some of what he writes about are the quirky footnotes to history that remind you that history is about real people. It's Paganini's DNA and resultant anatomy that provides the background for the title, "*The Violinist's Thumb*." (If he had decided to let Toulouse-Lautrec's anatomy inspire the title, the book would have topped every best seller list.) Even when Kean delves into more serious topics like the relationship between Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*, he resists the temptation to lapse into jargon and confuse his reader. Kean's style respects his readers. For example, he explains how DNA, natural selection, and sexual selection all work together to create our "lust for art." This can

get pretty abstract, and I begin wondering if it's the late hour or the second Jameson's that's fogging my cranium. Then Kean interjects this, "Now, if talents on a par with Matisse or Mozart seems a trifle elaborate for getting laid, you're right;..." Whoa! I'm back in focus. I have no idea how serious scientists regard this book, but for the layperson who is interested in learning more about modern research into DNA, one can hardly do better.

Like the previous Sam Kean book, *The Disappearing Spoon: And Other True Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World from the Periodic Table of the Elements*, this is a well-chosen variety-show of stories along a common theme. In this case, the theme is genetic inheritance, but just as with the chemistry and chemists theme of his previous book, the author has used evolution, DNA, genetics, and the inheritance schema as a guide rather than a straight-jacket. Take, for example, the bizarre tale of Einstein's tiny brain (indeed, it's not how much you have, it's what you can DO with it!), and what happened to it after he died. It's just one little bit of data that, taken with all the other little bits, helps define the whole. And in a way, that, too is illustrative of the author's theme. This is the kind of book you can pick up, open at random, and find something enjoyable. As I have with *The Disappearing Spoon*, I look forward to re-reading it again and again.

Kean manages to make DNA and genetics interesting and accessible. Kean doesn't assume prior knowledge, but doesn't get sidetracked explaining, instead it all flows together seamlessly. I would recommend this book to all the CSI fans out there. So many people talk about DNA but few know how it works. Kean's book can give its readers some solid information about DNA, and when you combine that with some really interesting characters from history, you get one excellent book. I'd give it 6 stars if I could.

This isn't written for newbies (like me) to the study of genetics and DNA. The writer presumes the reader knows the basics already. If you don't know what a base pair is, or the relationship between DNA, genes and chromosomes, you may struggle understanding the book. This is unlike Kean's "Disappearing Spoon" where an understanding of chemistry is developed "from the ground up."

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