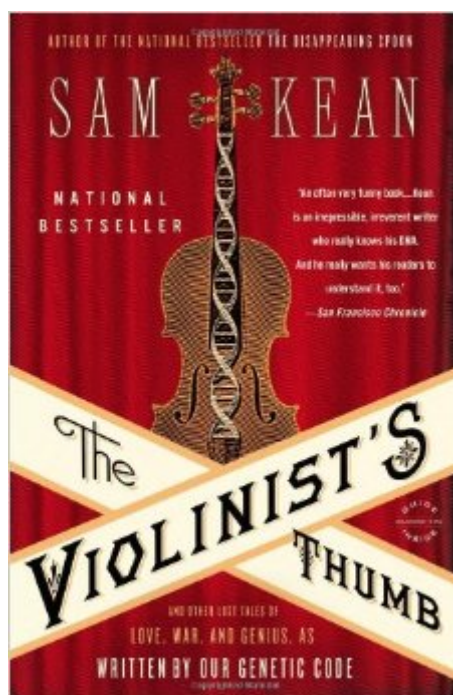


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The Violinist's Thumb: And Other Lost Tales Of Love, War, And Genius, As Written By Our Genetic Code



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

The Violinist's Thumb is about DNA. It's about how our genes affect our abilities and outcomes, and about the people along the way who have been instrumental (eh? like a violin? eh?) in discovering or demonstrating genetics at work. The title comes from Niccolò Paganini, a violinist so talented that the church refused to bury him for decades after his death because of rumours that he had made a pact with the devil in order to play as he did. Turns out, he just had a genetic disorder that allowed him to bend his fingers and thumbs at bizarre, unnatural angles, a condition which also certainly

shortened his life. *The Violinist's Thumb* is, well, a bit "science-y" in places. It's been a long time since I've had to keep track of terms like genetic coding, DNA and RNA strands, double helix and chromosomal markers (Is that last one even right? I should know this. I JUST read a book about DNA!) Some of it took me back to high school and university biology classes, and some of it caused me to glaze over a bit (much like *The Calculus Diaries*). But the heavy duty big brain required to follow the technical aspects of the book is more than mitigated by the wealth of interesting anecdotes throughout the book. Sam Kean tells us about Gregor Mendel's nervous breakdowns, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's famously stunted growth, and Tsutomu Yamaguchi--"the most unlucky man of the twentieth century"--who, after being caught by the atomic blast in Hiroshima got on a train and went to Nagasaki, just in time for the second bomb to drop. Sam Kean has also hidden a little reward for his readers within the book, much like a marked chromosome in someone's DNA. It's an acrostic, or an encoded message composed of the first letter of several lines or paragraphs of text.

*A full summary of this book is available here: [An Executive Summary of Sam Kean's 'The Violinist's Thumb: And Other Lost Tales of Love, War and Genius as Written by Our Genetic Code'](#)The main argument: In a sense the story of DNA has two strands. On the one hand, as the blueprint of all that lives and the mechanism of heredity, DNA tells the story of life (and the history of life), from the smallest, simplest microbe, to we human beings, who have managed to figure all of this out. Of course, there is still much about DNA that we don't know. But given that we didn't even know of its existence until a lowly Swiss physician and biologist named Friedrich Miescher stumbled upon it in the 1860's, you have to admit we've come a long way in such a short time. And this is just where the second strand of the story of DNA begins: the story of our unraveling the mystery. While perhaps not as grandiose as the story of life itself, this detective story is significant in its own right, for it has transformed how we understand all that lives--including ourselves. This is especially the case given that the latest chapters in this story have revealed not only our own genomic blueprint, but the (deeply daunting) fact that we have the power to change this blueprint and thus became the masters of our own future as a species. While each of the strands of the story of DNA could fill a book in their own right (if not several), the author Sam Kean has managed to weave the two together and fit them both in his new book `The Violinist's Thumb: And Other Lost Tales of Love, War and Genius, as Written by Our Genetic Code'.

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The Violinist's Thumb: And Other Lost Tales of Love, War, and Genius, as Written by Our Genetic

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