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Author Sam Kean Entertained Dacus Library Friends at Winthrop

Winthrop University

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Author Sam Kean Entertained Dacus Library Friends at Winthrop

Quick Facts

- Popular science author Sam Kean told Dacus Friends of the Library members at their Oct. 5 annual meeting that he was fascinated by how mercury displayed properties of both a liquid and a metal.
- He is now author of the popular science bestsellers "The Disappearing Spoon," "The Violinist's Thumb" and "The Tale of the Dueling Neurosurgeons."



Sam Kean, left, and Library Dean Mark Herring

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA – Popular science author Sam Kean's interest in science was sparked in the third grade by the strange behavior of mercury that he collected from broken thermometers.

He told [Dacus Friends of the Library](#) members at their Oct. 5 annual meeting that he was fascinated by how it displayed properties of both a liquid and a metal. This later led Kean to start out his college career planning to be a scientist, but because he enjoyed writing about things more than lab work, he veered into a major in English.

He is now author of the **popular science bestsellers** "The Disappearing Spoon," "The Violinist's Thumb" and "The Tale of the Dueling Neurosurgeons." He maintained his interest in mercury and how it was connected with history from ancient times, where it was the name of a planet and a God, up through the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-06, where the famed explorers used it so much for its laxative effects that sites along their route to this day are characterized by high mercury concentrations in the soil.

All this was the genesis of his first book, "**The Disappearing Spoon**," which Kirkus Reviews referred to as "an idiosyncratic romp through the history of science." The book title comes from the quality of the element gallium, which is a metal that melts at 84 degrees Fahrenheit. A common prank is to mold the element into spoons which disappear when they come in contact with a heated drink.

Kean's second book, "**The Violinist's Thumb**," deals with the effects of genes and DNA. It takes its title from the malleable digits of famed 19th century violinist Niccolò Paganini. Scientists believe the violinist suffered from Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder of the connective tissue, often resulting in being unusually tall and having lengthened limbs and long, thin fingers. Kean stressed that who a person is cannot be determined by DNA, but is a result of "genetics working with the environment."

Kean related several accounts from his book "**Tales of the Dueling Neurosurgeons**." He noted that injury to different parts of the brain's temporal lobe can lead to the loss of very specific abilities, such as the inability to identify plants and/or animals. One can lose the ability to talk, but still be able to sing. This was the initial case with Gabby Gifford, the Arizona Congresswoman who was shot in 2011.

Kean also spoke about conjoined twins, born connected at the head, who share a thalamus. While one can taste what the other eats or feel pain when the other pricks a finger, they have different personalities and one even likes ketchup, which the other hates, and one likes canned corn, but if she eats it the other twin develops an allergic reaction.

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