



The Grammarians, by Cathleen Schine
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, January 2020

The title characters of Cathleen Schine’s warm and witty novel *The Grammarians* are a pair of identical twin sisters. Laurel and Daphne Wolfe look so much alike that heads turn wherever they go. Even their bemused parents Arthur and Sally have trouble telling them apart.

From an early age, the girls are fascinated with language, starting with their own unique twin babblings. When Laurel and Daphne begin to utter words, they speak in complete sentences. Eager to increase their vocabulary, the twins collect words like other children might collect stamps. Each chapter of *The Grammarians* cleverly begins with a word definition that somehow relates to the story’s narrative.

Laurel and Daphne fondly recall the day their father Arthur brought home their most treasured possession—a behemoth edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Arthur bought the dictionary along with boxes of other books from a man in his office. It was the dictionary, however, which Arthur set on a lectern-like book stand that enthralled the twins. When Arthur and Sally get their daughters a dog, the girls invariably name him Webster.

The twins grow up fiercely loyal to one another yet keenly competitive. Laurel, who had been born 17 minutes earlier than Daphne “did everything first. Everything good, everything bad. Laurel was first in the cold water at the beach, and first through the door of every classroom.” Their parents had known they were expecting twins; Daphne was dismayed not to be “the startling bonus, the icing on the cake...she was the second child.”

During their college years, Laurel and Daphne start at different colleges but end up together at Pomona. After a few years in California, they decide to come home: “They agreed that by ‘home’ they did not mean Larchmont; they meant New York City, home to all.” The two share an apartment in the East Village and begin their

careers. Daphne becomes a small-press copy editor, and Laurel starts teaching kindergarten. Eventually, they each marry and start families.

When Laurel leaves her teaching job and becomes a poet, Daphne sees her sister's unstructured poems as an affront to standard English. Inexplicably, the twins' mutual love of language strains their relationship. It's up to their families to help Laurel and Daphne bridge the divide.

Ms. Schine, whose comedic flair has been compared to Nora Ephron's, completely nails the complex twin relationship, as this identical-twin reviewer can attest. But one need not be a twin to enjoy *The Grammarians*. Deemed a 2019 New York Times Best Book, *The Grammarians* is a delightful, captivating read.