

# Book Review

## Rebel with a Clause

Mariner Books, an imprint of HarperCollins, New York, 2022  
ISBN 978-0-358-27815-3 (363 pp.)

By Amy Spungen

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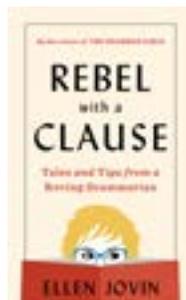
### UNFOLDING A TABLE AND UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF GRAMMAR WITH A LIVELY SENSE OF HUMOR

Once grammarian Ellen Jovin has accomplished something miraculous in these fraught times—she has united people across the United States toward one purpose. That purpose is understanding grammar, to which end she deploys her knowledgeable self, a slew of reference books, and a handy fold-up table. Jovin's Grammar Table may appear anywhere people have questions about grammar, which is basically everywhere. Luckily for us, she has recounted some recent Grammar Table adventures in her new book, *Rebel with a Clause*.

Forget that Jovin has studied 25 languages and has degrees from Harvard and UCLA. She just wants to have fun—grammar fun. As she sweeps readers along on her delightful question-and-answer journey hopping and skipping around the US, readers have fun, too.

After introducing the Grammar Table in 2018 near her Manhattan apartment and receiving an enthusiastic response, Jovin and

Brandt Johnson, her husband and business partner, folded up the Grammar Table, loaded it into their car, and hit the road. They traveled throughout the US, taking a break during the pandemic. As she set up and took down her table day after day, month after month, Jovin met all kinds of interesting people, and it is their conversations about grammar that drive this book. She divides these encounters into chapters mainly pertaining to the tricky points of grammar addressed. At the end



of each chapter is a “quizlet” for readers to test themselves.

Among the joys of reading a grammar book that is both instructive and just plain funny is discovering that regardless of age, gender, religion, race, or geography, people are confused and often intimidated when it comes to grammar. Jovin loves helping people sort these questions out, and her special talent is meeting them on their level. (Another talent is her ability to draw cartoons that support her grammar advice.)

Readers meet an endlessly entertaining array of characters, like overly enthusiastic Jack from Decatur, Alabama, who eats Jovin's lunch apple during their exchange; Andrew from Minneapolis, irritated by a colleague who uses “way too

many commas”; and a five-year-old from New York City who asks about gerunds. Each of them leaves feeling understood and elevated, grammar-wise, after speaking with Jovin.

*Rebel with a Clause* will appeal to editors as well as general readers, because no matter how expert we consider ourselves to be, there are always, always, aspects of grammar editors could use a bit of reminding about. (Jovin might point out that the preceding sentence ends with a preposition—but that would only be if I approached the Grammar Table and wrote it down, asking for her opinion. That is because she does not chase people around spouting grammar facts. As Jovin explains in chapter 36, some rules, like the preposition one, are outdated and can often be safely ignored.)

My only complaint about this book is that it ends. But perhaps we can hope that Jovin's conclusion portends a follow-up volume: “Language is a dance we all do together as human beings, and I hope you have enjoyed this dance. Let's keep dancing together, okay?” Okay! *f*

## Grammar, continued

*them*. With this construction, we tend to see the same plural agreement as the other construction: “They went to the store on their own.”

The EFA's intent is to be an all-inclusive organization. Members should follow the advice, for now, of the style guide they're using. Most of the major style guides—CMOS, APA, and AP, for example—have embraced the use of singular *they* for people with *they/them* pronouns. However, they also hesitate about using a singular *they*—and the awkward constructions of *he/she*, *(s) he*, or *he or she*—when gender is unknown or irrelevant to the subject of the sentence. The EFA continues to follow this debate. *f*