

HOW WE USE BOOKS: *not just for reading*

because book collecting is camp as hell

Adapted from the thesis of Dr Ellie Greer

Reading is often viewed as the only possible use for a book, but Walter Benjamin notes that non-reading is characteristic of book collectors, who value their books not only for their utility as reading material but for a variety of other personal reasons.¹ Even in cases where books were never read, it does not follow that they were never used. Book owners exhibit multiple ways of using and owning their books. Some just enjoy them: Gordon N. Ray, in his discussion of contemporary book collectors, differentiates between reading and the satisfaction of physical ownership.² Sometimes, he acknowledges, collectors are motivated by the thrill of seeking out and buying the books they desire. This pleasure of ownership does not assume or require reading, and although it is not using books purely as content carriers deriving pleasure from them is still certainly a use. A fascinating example is the below volume, owned by Sir Richard Ellys (1682-1742) at Blickling Hall.

A GREEK NEW TESTAMENT printed in 1628 in Sedan by Jean Jannon

'the smallest Greek Testament ever printed, with the exception of Pickering's miniature edition of 1828'.³

a prominent and prolific Protestant printer, who trained in Paris with Robert Estienne before relocating to the Calvinist Academy of Sedan.



Given Ellys' academic interest in both the text and, perhaps, its printer, it is peculiar that Ellys never cut open and examined this appealing little book, and certainly never even tried to read it. Considering its uniqueness and historical significance, why would this be the case?

*perhaps he forgot about it after buying it?
decided it wasn't interesting enough to open and read?
never got around to it? (something we can all sympathize with!)*

Perhaps, he had never planned to open this book, preferring to deliberately conserve its virginal state by keeping away the defilement of human eyes and hands.

Regardless of what decisions he made or didn't make, this small volume serves as an excellent example of the complexity of a collected book's acquisition and use. There are several possible purposes embodied here and, additionally, multiple, complex, and varied use behaviours exist beyond the personal activities of reading and admiring one's books.

Books have a social value. Non-reading use behaviours include a variety of social or cultural activities, which can serve to cultivate or demonstrate social and cultural capital. They are externally-focused, with a putative audience in mind. The examination of the library's social and cultural symbolism requires that we look at these different types of value.

SOURCES

- Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 59-67 (p. 62).
- Gordon N. Ray, 'The Private Collector and the Literary Scholar', in *The Private Collector and the Support of Scholarship: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1969), pp. 27-31 (p. 33).
- T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: The Bible House, 1903), number 4676.

