HOW WE USE BOOKS:
not just for reading

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. 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. 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

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.

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


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Sources

