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Japan: Land of the Rising Sun

Reading and Viewing Suggestions from PLL Trip Scholar Dr. Peter van Lidth de Jeude C'04

Books (Nonfiction)

Culture Smart! Japan: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture by Paul Norbury

This book is closer to a travel guide than a history, but it is a useful, quick primer on etiquette, social expectations, and the unwritten rules of everyday life in Japan. Read it before departure and you will find yourself far more comfortable navigating everything from bowing and gift-giving to the quiet of a Tokyo train car.

Lost Japan by Alex Kerr

Originally written in Japanese (and the first book by a non-Japanese author to win the Shincho Gakugei Prize), Kerr's collection of essays is a deeply personal, sometimes rueful love letter to traditional Japan, from Kabuki and calligraphy to the temples and old houses of Kyoto. Kerr does not hide his frustration with how much of that world has been paved over, which makes this a thoughtful companion for our days in Kyoto and Nara, when the old and the new will often sit side by side.

Inventing Japan, 1853–1964 by Ian Buruma

If you only read one overview of modern Japan, this short and very readable book is a great choice. Buruma traces the century from Commodore Perry's Black Ships to the Tokyo Olympics, explaining how Japan transformed itself into a modern nation and empire, how that project ended in catastrophe, and how the country reinvented itself again after 1945.

A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present by Andrew Gordon

A step up in density from Buruma, Gordon's book is the standard college-level survey for good reason. It is clear, balanced, and comprehensive, paying careful attention not just to emperors and politicians but to workers, women, and ordinary people. This is the book to keep on hand if you want a reliable reference for anything you encounter on the trip from the Tokugawa period to the present.

Hiroshima Notes by Kenzaburō Ōe

A personal favorite. Written in the early 1960s, before Ōe would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, this collection of essays documents his visits to Hiroshima and his encounters with hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors) and the doctors who treated them. Ōe is less interested in the bomb itself than in the dignity of those who refused to be defeated by it, and in what their example demands of the rest of us. This is not an easy or tidy book, but it is a profound meditation on memory, human dignity, and moral responsibility that has stayed with me long after I first read it.

Books (Fiction, including Manga)

Shōgun by James Clavell

No list about Japan would be complete without Clavell's sprawling, page-turning epic about John Blackthorne, an English pilot shipwrecked in Japan in 1600 who becomes entangled in the struggle between the powerful lord Toranaga and his rivals. Loosely based on William Adams and Tokugawa Ieyasu, the novel takes liberties with history, but it introduced millions of Western readers to feudal Japan and remains a gripping read. Pair it with Milton's *Samurai William* for the real story and with both television adaptations below. *Content warning: violence, including ritual suicide and executions.*

Musashi by Eiji Yoshikawa

Sometimes described as Japan's *Gone with the Wind*, this enormous historical novel (first serialized in the 1930s) follows the legendary swordsman Miyamoto Musashi as he grows from a wild young brawler into a disciplined master of both the sword and himself. It is an old-fashioned adventure story, full of duels, rivals, and lost loves, and it has shaped the popular image of the samurai in Japan more than any history book. It is also the source of much of the inspiration behind *Vagabond* and *Usagi Yojimbo*.

Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki

Published in 1914 by one of modern Japan's most beloved novelists, *Kokoro* ("heart") tells the story of a young student's friendship with an older man he calls Sensei, whose quiet melancholy hides a painful secret. The novel is a meditation on loneliness, guilt, and the passing of the Meiji era, and it is a perfect introduction to how Japanese writers grappled with the rapid modernization of their country.

Usagi Yojimbo (manga) by Stan Sakai

A personal favorite. Created by Japanese-American artist Stan Sakai and running since 1984, this manga-style series follows Miyamoto Usagi, a rabbit rōnin (loosely inspired by Miyamoto Musashi) wandering early Edo-period Japan. Don't let the anthropomorphic animals fool you: Sakai's meticulous research into Japanese history, folklore, crafts, and martial arts makes this one of the richest depictions of feudal Japan in any medium, and the stories range from rousing adventure to genuinely moving tragedy. Many stories even include notes explaining the history behind them. A wonderful entry point for readers of any age.

An Artist of the Floating World by Kazuo Ishiguro

Set in an unnamed Japanese city in the years after the war, Ishiguro's early novel is narrated by an aging painter who once lent his talents to imperialist propaganda and who now finds his reputation, and his daughter's marriage prospects, haunted by his past. Ishiguro is a master of the unreliable narrator, and the novel is a subtle and moving study of how individuals (and nations) come to terms, or fail to come to terms, with complicity.

Movies

Ikiru (1952)

A Kurosawa film without a single samurai, *Ikiru* ("to live") follows a dull Tokyo bureaucrat who learns he is dying of cancer and sets out to do one meaningful thing with the time he has left. It is a humane and deeply moving film, as well as a sharp satire of bureaucracy, and gives a vivid glimpse of Tokyo in the early postwar years.

Harakiri (1962)

Directed by Masaki Kobayashi, this film follows an aging rōnin who arrives at a lord's estate requesting permission to commit ritual suicide in the courtyard, and slowly reveals the reason for his visit. It is a devastating critique of the hypocrisy at the heart of the samurai code and one of the greatest Japanese films ever made. *Content warning: an extremely graphic and disturbing ritual suicide scene.*

Grave of the Fireflies (1988, anime)

Directed by Isao Takahata for Studio Ghibli and based on a semi-autobiographical story by Akiyuki Nosaka, this film follows two siblings, Seita and his little sister Setsuko, struggling to survive in the aftermath of the American firebombing of Kobe in 1945. It is one of the most powerful anti-war films ever made, animated or otherwise, and one of the most heartbreaking. *Content warning: deeply distressing depictions of the suffering and death of children.*

The Wind Rises (2013, anime)

Miyazaki's fictionalized biography of Jiro Horikoshi, the engineer who designed the Mitsubishi Zero fighter plane, is a gorgeous and melancholy film about the pursuit of beauty and the way dreams can be put to destructive uses. It was controversial in Japan and abroad for its portrayal of a man whose creations served the imperial war machine, and that moral tension is exactly what makes it so interesting. Also a lovely depiction of the Great Kantō Earthquake and interwar Japan.

Godzilla Minus One (2023)

A personal favorite. Takashi Yamazaki's film returns Godzilla to its postwar roots, following a former kamikaze pilot who failed to complete his mission and returns home to a devastated Tokyo consumed by shame. While it delivers the spectacle you'd expect (it became the first Godzilla film to win an Academy Award, for its visual effects), its real heart is a moving story about survivor's guilt, the rebuilding of a shattered nation, and the question of what it means to choose to live rather than die. Easily one of the best war movies of recent years, and it just happens to have a giant monster in it. *Content warning: intense scenes of destruction.*

TV Shows

Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories (2016–2019)

A personal favorite. Based on a manga by Yarō Abe, this quiet anthology series is set in a tiny diner in a Tokyo back alley that is open only from midnight to seven in the morning. Each episode centers on a regular customer and a dish they request from the taciturn owner, known only as "Master (the common term for the owner of a small eatery or bar)," and slowly reveals something about their lives. Gentle, funny, melancholy, and full of humanity (and wonderful food), it is the perfect show to watch with a late-night snack. (The earlier seasons originally aired in Japan as *Shinya Shokudō*.)

Pachinko (2022–2024)

Apple TV+'s adaptation of Min Jin Lee's novel is beautifully filmed and acted, moving back and forth between the family's early struggles in colonial Korea and Osaka and the 1980s. It departs from the novel in some ways but captures its emotional depth, and its opening credits sequence alone is worth the price of admission.

Tokyo Vice (2022–2024)

Loosely based on journalist Jake Adelstein's memoir about being the first American reporter on the crime beat at a major Japanese newspaper in the 1990s, this stylish crime drama (whose first episode was directed by Michael Mann) explores the world of the yakuza, the Tokyo police, and the media. Ken Watanabe is excellent as a weary detective. *Content warning: graphic violence.*

The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House (2023)

Directed in part by Hirokazu Kore-eda and based on the manga *Kiyo in Kyoto*, this gentle series follows two teenage girls who move to Kyoto's Gion district to train as maiko (apprentice geisha), one of whom ends up as the house's cook instead. A warm, beautifully shot look at the traditions of Gion and Kyoto's food culture.

Shōgun (2024)

FX's new adaptation, starring and produced by Hiroyuki Sanada as Toranaga with Anna Sawai and Cosmo Jarvis, rebalances Clavell's story to give far more weight to its Japanese characters, with most of the dialogue in Japanese. Lavishly made, beautifully acted, and meticulously researched, it set a record for the most Emmy Awards won by a single season of television, and it is well worth watching even (perhaps especially) for those who know the novel or the original miniseries. *Content warning: graphic violence and ritual suicide.*