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Japan: Land of the Rising Sun

Extended Reading and Viewing Suggestions by 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.

The Book of Tea by Kakuzō Okakura

Written in English in 1906 for a Western audience, this short and elegant book uses the tea ceremony as a window into Japanese aesthetics, Zen and Taoist thought, and the art of finding beauty in imperfection. It is as much an argument about the value of Asian culture in a world dominated by the West as it is a book about tea, and it makes for perfect preparation for our own tea ceremony experience.

The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan by Ivan Morris

An accessible and beautifully written portrait of the Heian court (794–1185), when Kyoto was the imperial capital and court aristocrats elevated poetry, fashion, and refined taste into something close to a religion. Morris draws heavily on *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book*, making this an ideal companion to Murasaki Shikibu's novel and an excellent introduction to the city we will be exploring.

Hideyoshi by Mary Elizabeth Berry

A more scholarly study of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the peasant-born warlord who completed the unification of Japan in the late sixteenth century and built Osaka Castle as a statement of his power. Berry is less interested in battlefield heroics than in how Hideyoshi actually governed, balancing a fractious collection of feudal lords to create a new political order. Those who want to understand the world of *Shōgun* (whose Taikō is a fictionalized Hideyoshi) will find this especially rewarding.

Samurai William: The Adventurer Who Unlocked Japan by Giles Milton

The real story behind *Shōgun*: William Adams, an English navigator who washed up in Japan in 1600 and became a trusted adviser to Tokugawa Ieyasu. Milton writes popular history at a brisk, entertaining clip, and while the book sometimes wanders into the broader story of English and Dutch trade in Asia, that wider lens is part of its value.

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.

The Making of Modern Japan by Marius B. Jansen

Easily one of the densest recommendations on this list, Jansen's magisterial survey runs to nearly 900 pages and covers the period from 1600 through the late twentieth century. It is a book better dipped into than read cover to cover, but for those who want real depth on the Tokugawa shogunate, the Meiji Restoration, and the rise of imperial Japan, there is simply no better single volume.

Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake by Edward Seidensticker

Seidensticker, best known as a translator of *The Tale of Genji* and of Kawabata, here turns his attention to the transformation of Edo into Tokyo between 1867 and the devastating Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. It is a charming, anecdote-rich portrait of a city in the midst of breathtaking change and a wonderful way to prepare for our walks through the older districts of Asakusa.

War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War by John W. Dower

The first of several books by John Dower on this list, this is a deeply researched and unsettling look at how racial stereotypes shaped the way Americans and Japanese saw (and fought) one another during the Second World War. Dower examines propaganda, cartoons, films, and official documents on both sides to show how dehumanization made the extraordinary brutality of the Pacific War possible. A scholarly but very readable book that remains essential to understanding the war and its memory.

Japan at War: An Oral History by Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook

A remarkable collection of interviews with Japanese men and women who lived through the war years, including soldiers, factory workers, schoolchildren, and survivors of the firebombings and the atomic bombs. The voices are varied, honest, and often deeply moving, and the book gives a perspective on the

war that most American readers have simply never encountered. Some of the testimony describes atrocities and wartime suffering in vivid detail.

Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan by Herbert P. Bix

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Bix's biography of the Shōwa Emperor challenges the postwar image of Hirohito as a passive, powerless figurehead and argues that he was an active participant in Japan's wartime decisions. It is a long, scholarly, and at times polemical work, and not every historian agrees with Bix's conclusions, but it is indispensable for understanding the war, the surrender, and the decision by the American occupation to keep the emperor on the throne.

Hiroshima by John Hersey

First published in 1946 as an entire issue of *The New Yorker*, Hersey's account of six survivors of the Hiroshima bombing remains one of the most important pieces of journalism of the twentieth century. Its quiet, restrained prose makes the human cost of the bomb impossible to ignore, and it played a major role in shaping how Americans understood what had happened. Be sure to find an edition that includes "Aftermath," the chapter Hersey added in 1985 after returning to see how the six survivors' lives had unfolded. A must-read before our day in Hiroshima.

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.

Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6–September 30, 1945 by Michihiko Hachiya

Dr. Hachiya was the director of the Hiroshima Communications Hospital and was himself badly injured in the bombing. His diary of the weeks that followed records, in remarkably calm and clinical prose, the chaos of a hospital overwhelmed by the dying, the slow and terrifying discovery of radiation sickness, and the strange mix of rumor, grief, and resilience among the survivors. An extraordinary primary source that pairs well with Hersey. Content warning: frank descriptions of injuries and death.

The Bells of Nagasaki by Takashi Nagai

Nagai was a Catholic physician and radiologist in Nagasaki's Urakami district, which was home to Japan's oldest Christian community and lay almost directly beneath the bomb. Despite losing his wife and suffering from leukemia, he cared for the wounded and wrote this account, which became a bestseller in Japan. His religious interpretation of the bombing remains controversial, but the book is a powerful and important document of faith grappling with catastrophe.

Nagasaki: Life After Nuclear War by Susan Southard

Nagasaki is too often treated as a footnote to Hiroshima, and Southard's book is a much-needed corrective. Following five survivors who were teenagers in 1945, she traces not just the day of the bombing but the decades of illness, discrimination, and activism that followed, including the years of censorship under the American occupation. An accessible, compassionate, and deeply researched book.

A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies by Martin J. Sherwin

For those wanting to understand the decision to use the bomb from the American side, Sherwin's classic study remains essential. Sherwin traces how Roosevelt and Truman thought about the bomb not only as a weapon to end the war but as a diplomatic tool for the postwar world, particularly in relation to the Soviet Union. More scholarly than Hersey or Southard, but clearly written and thought-provoking.

Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire by Richard B. Frank

A detailed, rigorously researched military history of the final months of the war that makes the strongest scholarly case that the atomic bombs were necessary to force Japan's surrender. Frank draws heavily on decoded Japanese communications to show how determined Japan's leadership was to fight on. Whether or not you are ultimately persuaded, this is an important counterweight to Sherwin and Hasegawa.

Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa

Hasegawa, drawing on American, Japanese, and Soviet archives, argues that the Soviet declaration of war in August 1945 played a more decisive role in Japan's surrender than the atomic bombs. It is a scholarly and at times demanding read, but it reframes the end of the war as a three-way contest rather than a simple American-Japanese story, and read alongside Frank and Sherwin it gives a full picture of one of the most debated questions in modern history.

Thank God for the Atom Bomb, and Other Essays by Paul Fussell

Fussell, a veteran infantry officer in Europe who was preparing to take part in the invasion of Japan in 1945, wrote the title essay as a deliberately provocative response to historians he felt had never faced combat. It is angry, personal, and uncomfortable, and many readers will strongly disagree with it, but it captures with brutal honesty how many soldiers of that generation felt about the bomb. Reading it alongside Ōe makes for one of the most challenging and rewarding pairings on this list.

Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II by John W. Dower

Winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, this is the definitive history of the American occupation of Japan and one of the finest works of history I know. Dower explores how ordinary Japanese people navigated hunger, humiliation, black markets, and a sudden flood of American ideas about democracy, and how the occupation itself was a strange mix of idealism and authoritarianism. Long but never dull, this is the book to read if you want to understand how postwar Japan came to be.

Inside GHQ: The Allied Occupation of Japan and Its Legacy by Eiji Takemae

The densest and most academic recommendation on this list, Takemae's study looks at the inner workings of General MacArthur's occupation headquarters, from the drafting of the new constitution to land reform, labor policy, and the treatment of minorities. Written by one of Japan's leading historians of the occupation, it is an excellent complement to Dower for those who want to see the machinery of occupation up close and from a Japanese scholarly perspective.

Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World by John W. Dower

A collection of essays that brings together many of Dower's central concerns, including how Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been remembered (and forgotten) in both Japan and the United States, the legacies of the occupation, and the politics of war memory. Because it is a collection, it is easy to pick up and read one essay at a time, making it an ideal way to reflect on the trip after we return home.

Books (Fiction, including Manga)

The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu (translated by Royall Tyler)

Often called the world's first novel, this eleventh-century masterpiece written by a lady-in-waiting at the Heian court follows the romantic and political life of the "shining prince" Genji in the imperial capital that would become Kyoto. It is long and leisurely, and modern readers may find the court's customs (and Genji's behavior) alien and sometimes troubling, but it remains a cornerstone of Japanese culture. Tyler's translation is the most faithful; for a more readable entry point, Arthur Waley's older translation reads almost like a Victorian novel.

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.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet by David Mitchell

Set on Dejima, the tiny Dutch trading post in Nagasaki harbor that was for two centuries Japan's main window to the West, Mitchell's novel is a brilliant evocation of a closed country, of strangers living among one another without ever fully understanding each other, and of the people on both sides who tried to bridge that gap. An outstanding book.

Silence by Shūsaku Endō

Endō, a Japanese Catholic, wrote this novel about a Portuguese Jesuit who secretly enters Japan in the 1630s, during the brutal suppression of Christianity, to find his mentor, who is rumored to have renounced his faith. Set largely in and around Nagasaki, it is a profound and unsettling exploration of faith, betrayal, and whether Christianity could ever truly take root in Japan. It was adapted into a film by Martin Scorsese (see below). Content warning: depictions of torture.

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*.

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.

Vagabond (manga) by Takehiko Inoue

Inoue's adaptation of Yoshikawa's *Musashi* is a stunningly drawn, introspective take on the swordsman's life that spends as much time on Musashi's spiritual struggle as on his duels. The artwork, often closer to ink-brush painting than to typical comic art, is some of the most beautiful in all of manga. Though the series remains unfinished, it is well worth the time. Content warning: graphic violence.

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.

The Makioka Sisters by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki

Set among a once-prosperous Osaka merchant family in the years just before the Pacific War, Tanizaki's novel follows four sisters as the family tries (and repeatedly fails) to arrange a suitable marriage for the third sister. It is slow, elegant, and quietly heartbreaking, a portrait of a refined world on the verge of disappearing; the military government actually halted its serialization during the war. Its famous annual cherry blossom excursions to Kyoto make it especially fitting reading for an April trip to Osaka and Kyoto.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion by Yukio Mishima

Based on the true story of a young acolyte who burned down Kyoto's Kinkaku-ji in 1950, Mishima's novel is a dark, psychologically intense exploration of beauty, obsession, and destruction. It is a disturbing read in some ways, but there is no better way to prepare to see the Golden Pavilion (rebuilt in 1955) than to understand why someone might have wanted to destroy it.

The Old Capital by Yasunari Kawabata

Written shortly before Kawabata became the first Japanese author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, this short, lyrical novel follows a young woman in Kyoto who discovers she has a twin sister raised in very different circumstances. Organized around the seasonal festivals and landscapes of the city, it is as much a portrait of Kyoto itself as a story about its characters, and it was written in part as a lament for a traditional Kyoto Kawabata feared was vanishing.

Black Rain by Masuji Ibuse

Perhaps the most celebrated Japanese novel about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Ibuse's book is built around the diary of a survivor who, years later, is trying to prove that his niece was not exposed to radiation so that she can marry. Through this deceptively simple frame, Ibuse captures both the horror

of the bombing and the long shadow it cast over survivors who faced illness and discrimination for decades. Content warning: descriptions of the bombing's aftermath are graphic and harrowing.

The Crazy Iris and Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath edited by Kenzaburō Ōe

An anthology of short fiction by Japanese writers, several of them survivors, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their aftermath, selected and introduced by Ōe. The stories vary in tone and style, which is part of the point: together they show how writers struggled to find any adequate form for an experience that seemed to defy literature. A natural companion to *Hiroshima Notes*. Content warning: depictions of death and severe injury.

Barefoot Gen (manga) by Keiji Nakazawa

Nakazawa was six years old when the bomb fell on Hiroshima and killed much of his family, and this multi-volume autobiographical manga is his fictionalized account of the bombing and its aftermath. It is also a fierce critique of Japanese militarism and of the wartime pressure to conform. The art can look cartoonish at first, but the story is anything but, and it remains one of the most important works of atomic bomb literature in any form. Content warning: extremely graphic depictions of the bombing's effects on human beings; not for younger readers.

Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms (manga) by Fumiyo Kōno

A short, gentle, and devastating manga by a Hiroshima-born artist that follows a family of survivors across two generations, from the 1950s to the present day. Rather than depicting the bombing itself, Kōno focuses on its quiet, lingering effects: illness that can appear without warning, survivors' guilt, and the reluctance of later generations to talk about the past. It can be read in a single sitting and would be an excellent read on the train to Hiroshima.

In This Corner of the World (manga) by Fumiyo Kōno

Kōno's longer work follows Suzu, a dreamy young woman from Hiroshima who marries into a family in the nearby naval port of Kure during the war. Much of the story is devoted to the small domestic details of wartime life (rationing, cooking, family tensions) which makes the arrival of air raids and, eventually, the bombing of Hiroshima all the more powerful. It was adapted into an acclaimed anime film (see below).

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.

Tokyo Year Zero by David Peace

A dark, hallucinatory crime novel set in occupied Tokyo in 1946, in which a police detective hunts a serial killer (based on a real case) amid ruins, hunger, black markets, and the humiliation of defeat. Peace's fragmented, repetitive style is not for everyone, but few novels capture so vividly the physical and moral devastation of the immediate postwar period, making it an unsettling counterpart to Dower's *Embracing Defeat*. Content warning: graphic violence, including sexual violence.

Pachinko by Min Jin Lee

A sweeping multigenerational saga following a Korean family that emigrates to Osaka during Japan's colonial rule of Korea and struggles for decades against poverty and discrimination. Lee's novel sheds light on a part of Japanese history that many visitors never hear about, the experience of the Zainichi Korean community, while also being a deeply absorbing family story. It was also adapted into an excellent television series (see below).

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle by Haruki Murakami

Murakami is Japan's best-known living novelist, and this is arguably his most ambitious book. What begins as the story of an unemployed man in suburban Tokyo looking for his missing cat spirals into a surreal exploration of memory and violence that reaches back to Japan's wartime atrocities in Manchuria. Strange, haunting, and often funny, it is the Murakami novel that most directly confronts Japan's history. Content warning: contains a scene of extreme graphic violence.

Convenience Store Woman by Sayaka Murata

A short, funny, and unsettling novel about a woman in her thirties who has worked happily at the same Tokyo convenience store for eighteen years, much to the dismay of family and friends who want her to conform to expectations about careers, marriage, and normalcy. A great window into contemporary Japanese society and a quick, fun read for the flight.

Movies:

Rashomon (1950)

A personal favorite, as are all the Akira Kurosawa films on this list. Set in Heian-era Kyoto, *Rashomon* recounts a crime from the perspectives of four witnesses whose accounts contradict one another, raising questions about truth and self-deception that remain as relevant as ever. Its success at the Venice Film Festival introduced Japanese cinema to the world, and the phrase "Rashomon effect" is now used by historians and lawyers alike. Content warning: depicts a sexual assault (not graphically).

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.

Tokyo Story (1953)

Yasujirō Ozu's quiet masterpiece follows an elderly couple who travel to Tokyo to visit their grown children, only to find that the children are too busy with their own lives to make time for them. Regularly named among the greatest films ever made, it is slow, still, and restrained, and it captures with remarkable tenderness the strains that modernization placed on the Japanese family.

Seven Samurai (1954)

Kurosawa's epic about a poor farming village that hires seven masterless samurai to defend it from bandits is one of the most influential films ever made, the template for countless action and "assemble the team" films (including *The Magnificent Seven*). At over three hours long, it is a commitment, but it never drags, and Toshirō Mifune and Takashi Shimura give unforgettable performances. Content warning: battle violence.

Godzilla (1954)

Forget the later films about monsters wrestling each other: Ishirō Honda's original *Godzilla* is a somber, frightening film made less than a decade after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and just months after a Japanese fishing boat was contaminated by an American hydrogen bomb test. The monster is an unmistakable stand-in for nuclear destruction, and the images of a burning Tokyo would have been painfully familiar to its original audience. Be sure to watch the original Japanese version rather than the heavily altered American release.

Yojimbo (1961)

In perhaps Kurosawa's most purely entertaining film, Toshirō Mifune plays a wandering rōnin who arrives in a town torn apart by two rival gangs and cleverly plays them against each other. Darkly funny and endlessly cool, it was remade almost shot for shot by Sergio Leone as *A Fistful of Dollars*, launching the spaghetti western. It is also, of course, the source of the name *Usagi Yojimbo*. Content warning: violence.

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.

Japan's Longest Day (1967)

Kihachi Okamoto's gripping dramatization of the twenty-four hours before Japan's surrender in August 1945, including the attempted coup by army officers who tried to stop the Emperor's surrender broadcast from being aired. Little known in the U.S., it offers a rare Japanese perspective on the end of the war and is a natural companion to Hasegawa and Frank. (It was remade in 2015 as *The Emperor in August*.)

Ran (1985)

Kurosawa's late-career masterpiece transplants *King Lear* to sixteenth-century Japan, following an aging warlord who divides his domain among his three sons with catastrophic consequences. Visually breathtaking, with some of the most spectacular battle scenes ever filmed, it is a bleak and powerful meditation on power, betrayal, and the futility of violence. Content warning: graphic battle violence.

Tampopo (1985)

Billed as the first "ramen western," Jūzō Itami's comedy follows a truck driver who helps a widow transform her failing noodle shop, interspersed with odd and often hilarious vignettes about food and desire. A delightful and eccentric film and the best possible preparation for the meals ahead of us. Content warning: some sexual content.

My Neighbor Totoro (1988, anime)

Anything by Hayao Miyazaki belongs among my personal favorites, and this gentle story of two young sisters who discover forest spirits near their new home in the Japanese countryside is pure joy. Famously, it was originally released as a double feature with *Grave of the Fireflies*, which must have made for one of the most emotionally whiplash-inducing evenings in cinema history. Perfect for travelers of all ages.

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.

Black Rain (1989)

Shōhei Imamura's adaptation of Ibuse's novel, filmed in stark black and white, follows a young woman exposed to radioactive "black rain" after the Hiroshima bombing whose life is overshadowed by the

stigma of being a hibakusha. Restrained and haunting, it is a very different film from the Hollywood movie of the same name. Content warning: graphic depictions of the bombing's aftermath.

Shall We Dance? (1996)

A charming, gentle comedy about a buttoned-up Tokyo salaryman who secretly signs up for ballroom dancing lessons and slowly comes out of his shell. Beyond being a delight, it offers a funny and sympathetic look at the pressures of conformity in Japanese working life. (Skip the American remake.)

Princess Mononoke (1997, anime)

Miyazaki's epic fantasy set in the late Muromachi period pits the gods and creatures of an ancient forest against an iron-making town expanding into the wilderness, with a young prince caught between them. It is among the most ambitious animated films ever made, refusing easy heroes and villains in its exploration of nature, industry, and progress. Content warning: more violent than most Ghibli films, and not suitable for very young children.

Spirited Away (2001, anime)

Winner of the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, Miyazaki's masterpiece follows a young girl trapped in a bathhouse for spirits and gods after her parents are transformed into pigs. Steeped in Shinto folklore and full of unforgettable images, it is a perfect introduction to the Japanese world of kami (spirits) that we will encounter at shrines like Fushimi Inari.

Lost in Translation (2003)

Sofia Coppola's wistful film about two lonely Americans (Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson) who form an unlikely bond in a Tokyo hotel is as much about the disorientation of being a foreigner in Japan as it is about its characters. Some of its humor relies on stereotype, but it beautifully captures the jet-lagged, neon-lit dreaminess of a first visit to Tokyo.

Letters from Iwo Jima (2006)

Directed by Clint Eastwood as a companion to his *Flags of Our Fathers*, this Japanese-language film depicts the battle of Iwo Jima from the perspective of the Japanese soldiers defending the island, led by General Tadamichi Kuribayashi (Ken Watanabe). A rare Hollywood film that humanizes the "enemy," it is a sobering and moving watch. Content warning: graphic war violence, including suicide.

Departures (2008)

Winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, this film follows an out-of-work cellist who returns to his hometown and takes a job preparing the dead for funerals, a profession many Japanese regard as taboo. Funny, tender, and moving, it is a beautiful exploration of Japanese attitudes toward death, ritual, and family.

Emperor (2012)

Tommy Lee Jones plays General Douglas MacArthur in this drama about the first weeks of the occupation, as one of his officers is tasked with investigating whether Emperor Hirohito should be tried as a war criminal. The film takes considerable liberties (including an invented romance), but it is an accessible way into the questions Dower and Bix explore in much greater depth.

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.

In This Corner of the World (2016, anime)

Sunao Katabuchi's adaptation of Fumiyo Kōno's manga is a beautifully animated, painstakingly researched portrait of a young woman's life in wartime Kure, near Hiroshima. Where *Grave of the Fireflies* overwhelms, this film quietly accumulates everyday details until the war, and the bomb, intrude. It is a superb companion to our day in Hiroshima. Content warning: depictions of air raids and loss.

Silence (2016)

Martin Scorsese's long-gestating adaptation of Shūsaku Endō's 1966 novel follows two Portuguese Jesuit priests who travel to seventeenth-century Japan in search of their missing mentor during the brutal persecution of Christians around Nagasaki. A demanding, contemplative film about faith, doubt, and cultural collision (and a good argument for reading Endō's novel too). Content warning: prolonged scenes of torture and execution.

Shoplifters (2018)

Hirokazu Kore-eda's Palme d'Or-winning film follows a makeshift family living on the margins of Tokyo who take in a neglected young girl. Warm, funny, and ultimately devastating, it is a portrait of the poverty and loneliness that rarely make it into the image of Japan as a wealthy, orderly society, and a powerful meditation on what makes a family.

Perfect Days (2023)

Wim Wenders' film follows a quiet, contented man who cleans public toilets in Tokyo's Shibuya district, finding joy in cassette tapes, paperbacks, and the light filtering through the trees. Very little happens, and that is exactly the point. Kōji Yakusho won Best Actor at Cannes for his performance, and the film is a lovely meditation on simplicity and attention that will make you look differently at the city during our time in Shibuya.

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:

Shōgun (1980)

The original NBC miniseries starring Richard Chamberlain as Blackthorne and the great Toshirō Mifune as Toranaga was a cultural phenomenon when it aired and helped spark a wave of American interest in Japan. It shows its age in places, but it made the bold choice to leave much of the Japanese dialogue unsubtitled so that viewers would share Blackthorne's confusion, and Mifune's presence alone makes it worth seeking out.

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," 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.