

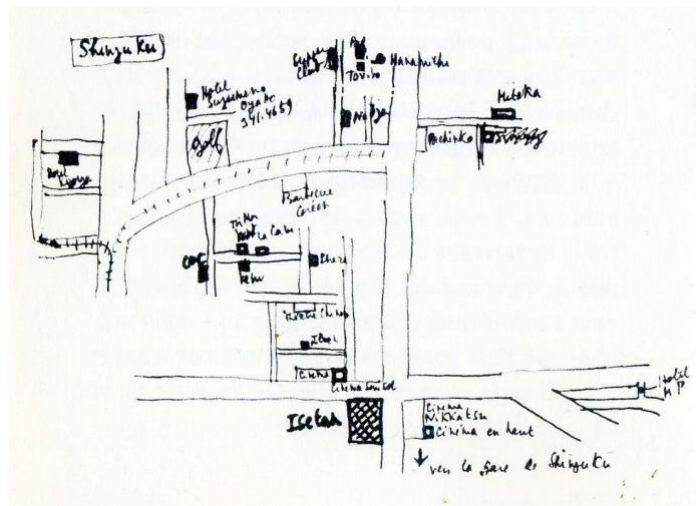
Reading Japan, below the surface

With light & easy news on any subject 24/7 available through all possible media, we often forget that there is an abundance of books, articles and magazines on the very topic that we just swiped or clicked away.

Allow me to present you this short note “Reading Japan” that lists a number of books that I think are worth reading. Perhaps you are dealing with “Japan” on a daily basis or perhaps you are only interested in “Things Japanese” on an infrequent basis. So why not take a dive in its culture and people, its rich heritage, customs and particularities? I am sure that a sincere interest in Japan’s culture will be beneficial for your business.

Herewith a list ten books that are truly great books from and on Japan. There is no ranking of “the number 1., 2. or 3. best”: each of these titles offers a different angle to get a better understanding of Japan. The ranking is alphabetical, by author’s name. The summaries are from various sources, incl. reviews, Amazon, Wiki, publisher’s notes etc.

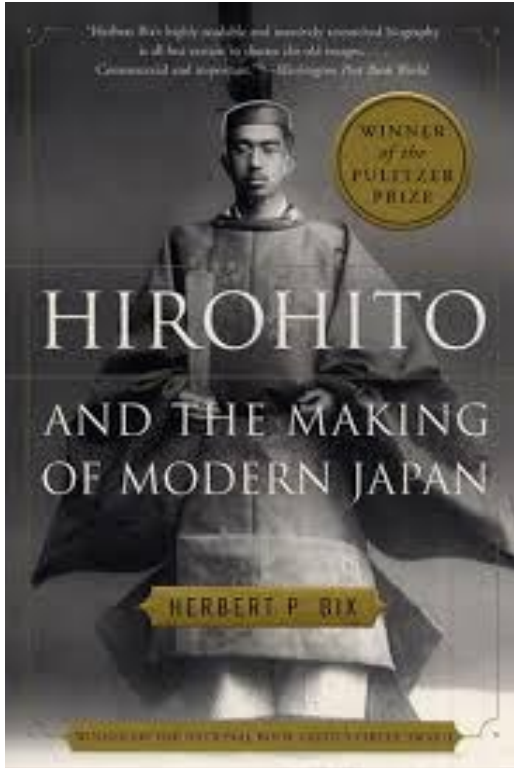
Roland Barthes, l'Empire des Signes in French, Empire of Signs in English



Roland Barthes was a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic and semiotician. He was invited the first time in 1966 by his friend Maurice Pinguet (1929-1991), then Director of the Franco-Japanese Institute in Tokyo. After making three trips to Japan, Barthes, decided to paint a picture of a Japan shaped by signs, codes and conventions, nobility and beauty, violence and emptiness, even in the districts, train stations, stores, theaters and gardens. As Ian Buruma wrote on this book: Barthes looked for signs and symbols. So, for example, one thing that interested him about Tokyo was the fact that nobody really knows anybody's address – it's a not a city of addresses. If you go somewhere for the first time, your host or hostess has to give you an accurate map or description – for example, you turn right at the greengrocers and left at the tobacconist and then you go straight on, and so on. And if you don't have those directions, then no taxi driver will be able to take you there.”

A great successor of Barthes' book is “Tokyo Totem”, published by Amsterdam-based Studio Monnik, see <http://www.tokyototem.jp/>

Herbert Bix, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan (history)



Pulitzer-price winner Bix documents in detail the strong, decisive role Hirohito played in wartime operations, from the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 through the attack on Pearl Harbor and ultimately the fateful decision in 1945 to accede to an unconditional surrender. In fact, the emperor stubbornly prolonged the war effort and then used the horrifying bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with the Soviet entrance into the war, as his exit strategy from a no-win situation. From the moment of capitulation, we see how American and Japanese leaders moved to justify the retention of Hirohito as emperor by whitewashing his wartime role and reshaping the historical consciousness of the Japanese people. The key to this strategy was Hirohito's alliance with General MacArthur, who helped him maintain his stature and shed his militaristic image, while MacArthur used the emperor as a figurehead to assist him in converting Japan into a peaceful nation. Their partnership ensured that the emperor's image would loom large over the postwar years and later decades, as Japan began to make its way in the modern age and struggled - as it still does - to come to terms with its past.

Menselijke voorwaarden, Junpei Gomikawa (novel)



The

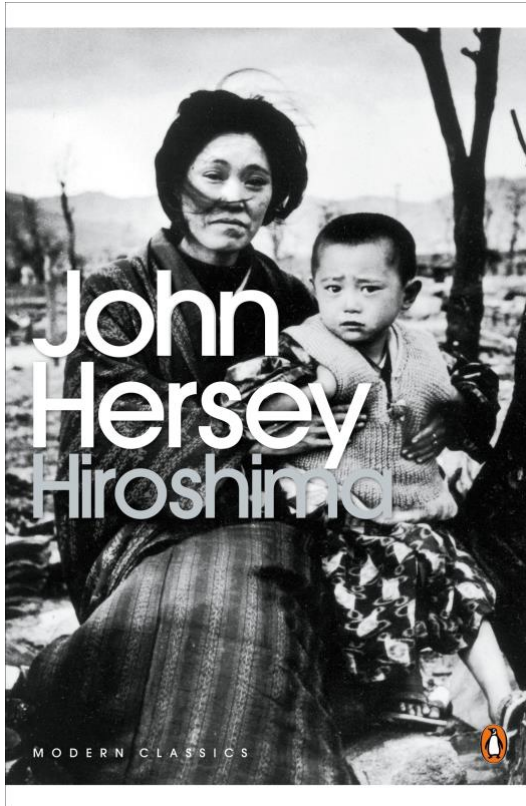
Human Condition (人間の条件 *Ningen no jōken*), translated in Dutch as *Menselijke Voorwaarden* (and as far as I know not yet translated in English) is partly autobiographical, written by Junpei Gomikawa. It was first published in Japan in 1958. The novel was an immediate bestseller and sold 2.4 million copies within its first three years after being published. It became the basis for Masaki Kobayashi's 9-hour trilogy movie *The Human Condition* released between 1959 and 1961.

The novel has three parts: The Mine, The Army, The way back home – and tells of the journey of the well-intentioned yet naive Kaji from labor camp supervisor to Imperial Army soldier to Soviet POW. Constantly trying to rise above a corrupt system, Kaji time and again finds his morals an impediment rather than an advantage.

The book – and movie – were so successful that “serious” authors like Tanizaki regarded did not see this book as a masterpiece.

Jacques Westerhoven, translator of a.o. Haruki Murakami, took up the challenge to provide a brilliant translation of this voluminous 1.400 long page-turner that will leave no one unmoved.

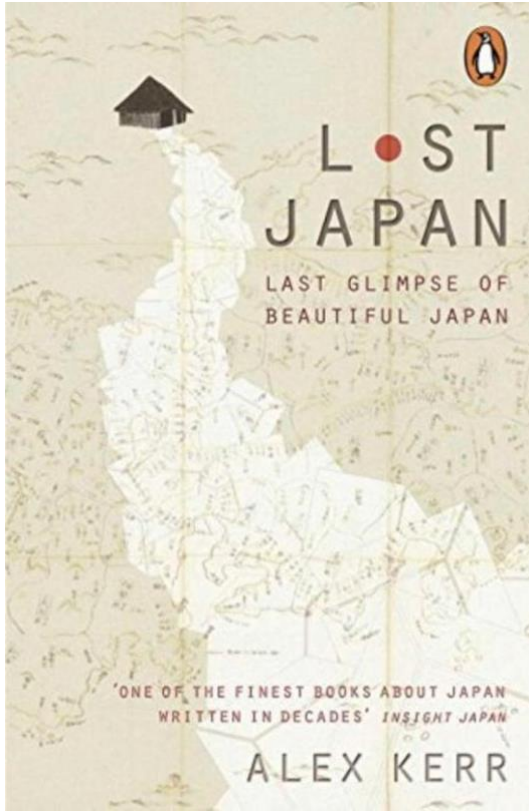
Hiroshima, John Hersey (report)



War correspondent John Hersey was one of the first Western journalists to view the ruins of Hiroshima after the bombing and began working on “Hiroshima” in 1945, when the managing editor of *The New Yorker* pointed out that, although the bombing had been widely written about, the victims’ stories still remained untold. After going to Japan and interviewing survivors, Hersey decided to show the bombing through six pairs of eyes, by introducing six characters: two doctors, a Protestant minister, a widowed seamstress, a young female factory worker and a German Catholic priest. It describes their mornings before the bomb was dropped. Through the book, the lives of these six people overlap as they share similar experiences. Each chapter covers a time period from the morning of the bombing to one year later for each witness. An additional chapter covering the aftermath 40 years after the bombing was added in later editions.

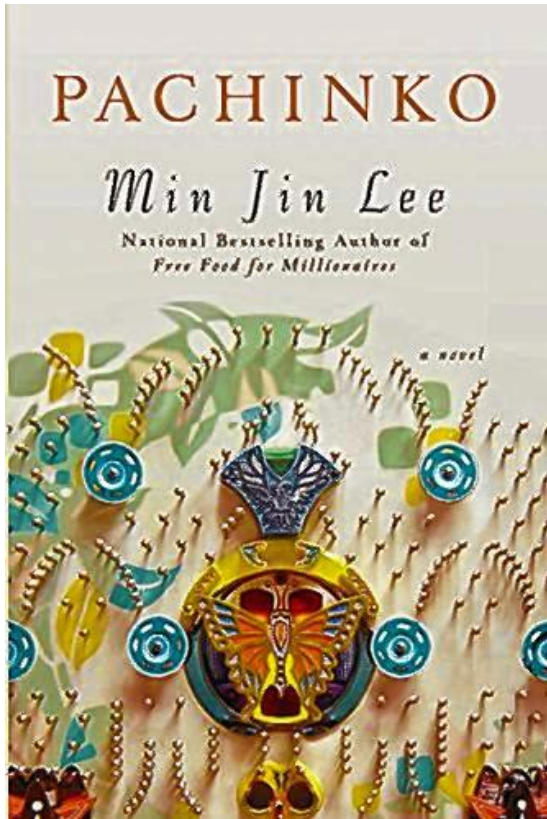
The text, originally published in *The New Yorker* had an immediate impact. Parts of it were excerpted in newspapers around the world, and it was read, in its entirety, on the radio. The book is available, for free via the website of *The New Yorker*: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>

Lost Japan, Alex Kerr (non-fiction)



Originally published in Japanese (美しき日本の残像) in 1993 (with the English translation following in 1996), “Lost Japan” by Alex Kerr is a fascinating chronicle of Kerr’s diverse interactions with the country. The book spans such subjects as restoring a traditional Japanese house in the Iya Valley in Shikoku to collecting Japanese antiques often found languishing unloved in the *kura*(storehouses) of family homes. Kerr is superlative not only in bringing a connoisseur’s eye to the artefacts and architecture of his adopted homeland, but also in providing revelatory insights into the country in general. He provides an illuminating exploration of many hidden, magical aspects of Japanese culture from the mandala of temples studded around Nara to the ancient brothel district of Tobita in southern Osaka. With this book Kerr was the first non-Japanese winner of the Shincho Gakugei literature award in 1994.

Pachinko by Min Jin Lee (novel)



In this novel, four generations of a poor Korean immigrant family fight to control their destiny in 20th-century Japan, exiled from a home they never knew.

Pachinko starts in early 1900s Korea with Sunja, the prized daughter of a poor yet proud family, whose unplanned pregnancy threatens to shame them.

Betrayed by her wealthy lover, Sunja finds unexpected salvation when a young tubercular minister offers to marry her and bring her to Japan to start a new life.

So begins a sweeping saga of exceptional people in exile from a homeland they never knew and caught in the indifferent arc of history. In Japan, Sunja's family

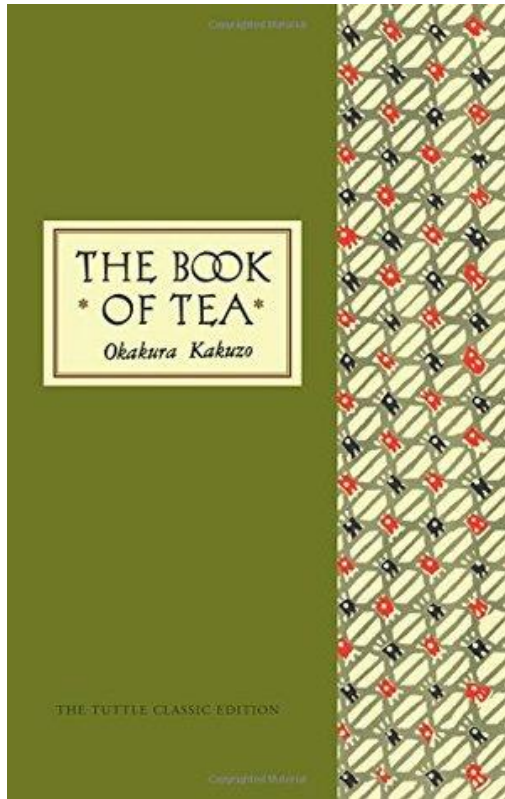
members endure harsh discrimination, catastrophes, and poverty, yet they also encounter great joy as they pursue their passions and rise to meet the challenges

this new home presents. Through desperate struggles and hard-won triumphs, they are bound together by deep roots as their family faces enduring questions of

faith, family, and identity. *Pachinko* also describes the difficulty for foreign immigrants to assimilate themselves in Japan, a phenomenon that is applicable

to many newcomers to Japan right now, under Japan's new policy to cope with the extreme labor shortage.

The Book of Tea, Kakuzo Okakura (essay)



Kakuzo Okakura, 1862 – 1913, wrote for a western audience, in English, one of the great tea classics. Okakura had been taught at a young age to speak English and was proficient at communicating his thoughts to the Western mind. In his book, he discusses such topics as Zen and Taoism, but also the secular aspects of tea and Japanese life. The book emphasizes how Teatism taught the Japanese many things; most importantly, simplicity. Okakura argues that this tea-induced simplicity affected art and architecture, and he was a long-time student of the visual arts. In the *Book of Tea*, Okakura states that Teatism, in itself, is one of the profound universal remedies that two parties could sit down to. He went on to mention that tea has been the subject of many historical events, such as peace treaties and the like. Okakura ends this book with a chapter on Tea Masters, and spends some time talking about Sen no Rikyū and his contribution to the Japanese tea ceremony. Reading When this, you'll see that the coffee culture of let's say Starbucks finds its equivalent – or its master – in Asia's and Japan's tea culture. Quoting Okakura: “Teatism insulates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.”

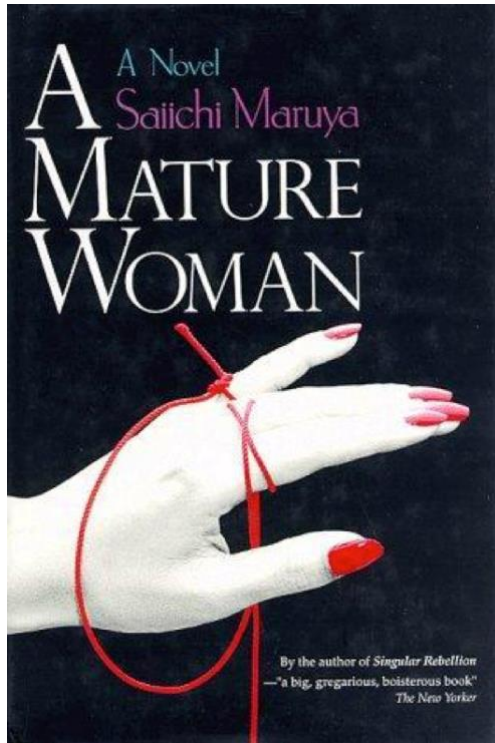
In Praise of Shadows, Jun'ichi Tanizaki (essay)



Nobel laureate Tanizaki discusses in 16 sections traditional Japanese aesthetics in contrast with change. Comparisons of light with darkness are used to contrast Western and Asian cultures. The West, in its striving for progress, is presented as continuously searching for light and clarity, while the subtle and subdued forms of oriental art and literature are seen by Tanizaki to represent an appreciation of shadow and subtlety, closely relating to the traditional Japanese concept of *sabi*. In addition to contrasting light and dark, Tanizaki further considers the layered tones of various kinds of shadows and their power to reflect low sheen materials like gold embroidery, patina and cloudy crystals. In addition, he distinguishes between the values of gleam and shine.

The text presents personal reflections on topics as diverse as architecture and its fittings, crafts, jade, food, cosmetics and *mono no aware* (the art of impermanence). Tanizaki explores in close description the use of space in buildings, lacquer ware by candlelight, monastery toilets and women in the dark of a brothel. The essay acts as "a classic description of the collision between the shadows of traditional Japanese interiors and the dazzling light of the modern age". The text is included in recent Dutch collection of essays and stories by Tanizaki: "De Brug der Dromen".

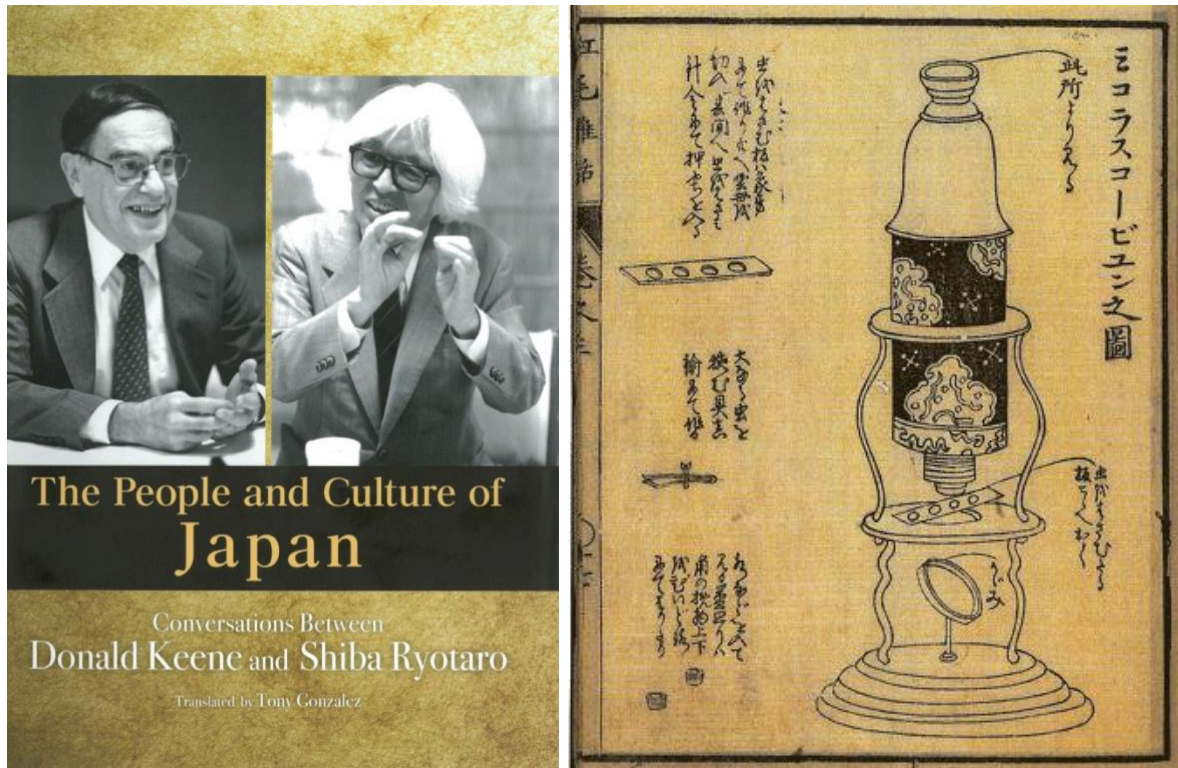
A mature woman, Saiichi Maruya (novel)



The central character, a strong-willed single woman, works in the male-dominated environment of a major daily newspaper. One of her editorials angers a powerful supporter of the ruling political party, and the government leans on her to keep her mouth shut. Far from bowing to the pressure, the woman retaliates, calling on a network of friends and relatives, including a fellow journalist with writer's block and an actress with mysterious ties to the prime minister himself.

The result is a slyly accurate picture of contemporary Japan that not only illuminates the role of women in the 1990s but cheerfully exposes bribery and coercion at the highest levels, and treats us to the kind of brilliant gossip that makes this novel hard to put down. And: it's a thoughtful novel about the Japanese tradition of gift-giving. When the lover of the journalist asks a favor from the secretary of the ruling party, this government official tells him that he is not ready to grant a favor for nothing in return. “But I am a poor professor”, says the lover of the journalist, “I have a second-hand car, a cheap watch and I cannot offer you any amount that has any meaning for you.” “It does not have to be money or an object, it also can be information, or a special idea”, says the politician. “It is my philosophy of life. I don't like to say ‘no’ to someone who asks me a favor, but I am not ready to do something for nothing. That is a bad idea, for both parties.”

The People and Culture of Japan, conversations between Donald Keene and Ryotaro Shiba (series of dialogues)



Travelling for a few days this November through Japan’s hinterland (Shimane Prefecture), I read this fascinating series of conversations between Donald Keene, one of the most famous scholars and writers on Japan, Ryotaro Shiba, one of Japan’s most famous novelists. Both Keene and Shiba refer to ancient Japanese writers and try to understand the way these writers have influenced Japanese culture and how they were the result of the developing Japanese culture. The dialogues center on a number of themes like “The birth of Japanese Culture” (Japan’s desire for esteem), “Confucianism and Japanese Morals”, “The World of Gold, the World of Silver” (the difference between Kyoto’s Golden and Silver Temple) and “Westerners in Japan”. Obviously this chapter describes the influence of the Dutch by introducing all kind of technologies and western learning. Hendrik Doeff, the Dutch trade commissioner at Deshima (who created the Doeff-Halma dictionary, the first Dutch – Japanese lexicon, a volume of 3.000 pages in 58 volumes), the physician J.L.C. Pompe van Meerdervoort) and obviously Franz von Siebold, all are discussed. Ryotaro Shiba states in this book that “the Dutch themselves had no idea how much they contributed to Japan. In that sense the Netherlands is a big country, big enough to have forgotten how much it gave to us.”

It is a truly great read, but perhaps not as a starter.