



UJA
KING DAVID SOCIETY

JAPAN

QUICK GUIDE

WHAT TO READ BEFORE YOU GO

KDS MISSION | MARCH 25-APRIL 2, 2025

WHAT TO READ BEFORE VISITING JAPAN

Below is a list of reading recommendations—both fiction and nonfiction—to help familiarize yourself in Japan’s history, culture, and societal nuances. Whether you’re interested in the rise of Japan’s global pop culture, its rich historical legacy, or a modern-day perspective on daily life, these books will give you invaluable insights before our mission.

NONFICTION

PURE INVENTION: HOW JAPAN'S POP CULTURE CONQUERED THE WORLD (2020) by MATT ALT

For anyone fascinated by anime, manga, video games, karaoke, or Hello Kitty, *Pure Invention* is an essential read, while also making for a fascinating nostalgia trip. Matt Alt, a Japan-based writer and translator, provides a thoughtful look at the country’s post-war economic boom and the subsequent journey of Japanese pop culture in shaping global trends.

The book begins with the invention of a simple toy car—a metal Jeep with a working axle—before exploring how Japan’s penchant for creativity led to world-dominating cultural icons like the Walkman, Pokémon, and *kawaii* aesthetics. This is a must-read for anyone curious about how Japan became a cultural superpower and how its innovations continue to influence the world today.

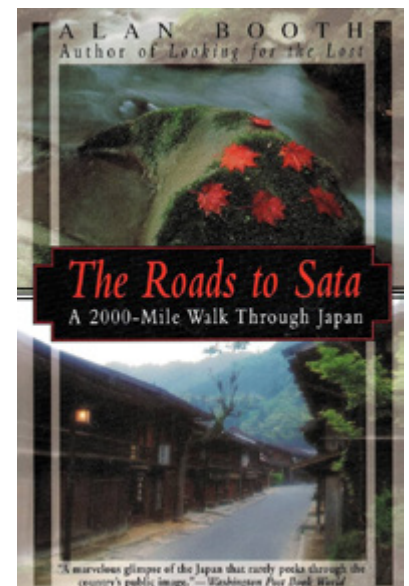
Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca/) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca/).



THE ROADS TO SATA: A 2000-MILE WALK THROUGH JAPAN (2021) by ALAN BOOTH

For an off-the-beaten-path perspective on Japan, this travel memoir chronicles Alan Booth’s 2,000-mile journey on foot from the northernmost tip of the country to the southernmost. Booth’s witty English humour and observant storytelling provides an insightful look into rural Japan, its people, and its hidden corners.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca/) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca/).



NONFICTION

A BRIEF HISTORY OF JAPAN: SAMURAI, SHOGUN, AND ZEN (2017) by JONATHAN CLEMENTS

For history enthusiasts, Jonathan Clements' *A Brief History of Japan* offers an engaging and insightful look at Japan's history, from ancient times to the present. Despite its concise length, this book manages to pack in a wealth of knowledge while remaining highly readable, bringing a witty and dynamic approach to subjects like samurai and Zen Buddhism. Clements challenges conventional narratives and provides fresh perspectives on Japan's religious, social, and political history, making it an excellent primer for visitors who want a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and its various layers.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

HOKKAIDO HIGHWAY BLUES: HITCHHIKING JAPAN (2000) by WILL FERGUSON

In a humorous and adventurous travel memoir by Canadian author Will Ferguson, *Hokkaido Highway Blues: Hitchhiking Japan* follows his journey chasing Japan's cherry blossoms as they bloom, from one end of the country to the other—hitchhiking the entire way. His encounters with locals and reflections on Japanese culture make this an entertaining and insightful read, perfect for those who love travel stories with a touch of comedy.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

A SPECIAL FATE: CHIUNE SUGIHARA: HERO OF THE HOLOCAUST (2014) by ALISON GOLD

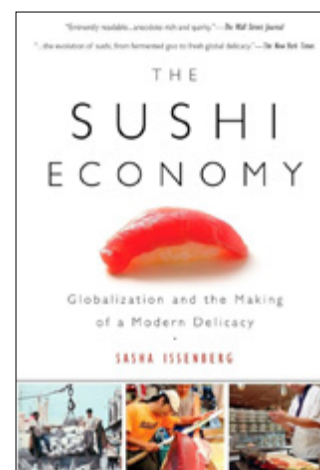
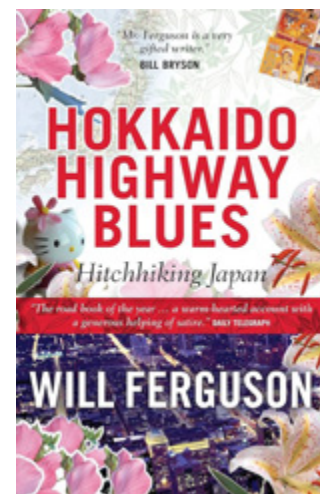
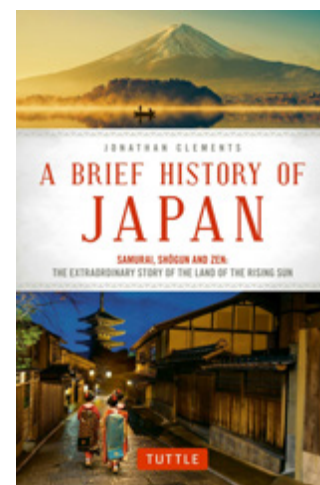
Chiune Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat who defied orders to issue visas to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. *A Special Fate* tells his remarkable story and the lives he saved, shedding light on an often-overlooked chapter of history.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

THE SUSHI ECONOMY: GLOBALIZATION AND THE MAKING OF A MODERN DELICACY (2008) by SASHA ISSENBERG

Now a global phenomenon, learn about sushi's journey from Japanese street food to international delicacy. Tracing the global history, the book takes you from the bustling Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo to tuna ranches in Australia, offering a deep dive into the economics and cultural evolution of this now beloved staple. Not just a perfect read for foodies, this book is a great option for anyone curious about history, globalization, business, or Japanese food and culture.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).



NONFICTION

GEISHA, A LIFE (2003) by MINEKO IWASAKI

Displeased with the representation of *geisha* in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Mineko Iwasaki—who Golden's novel was inspired by—chose to write her own memoir about her time as one of the most renowned *geishas* in Kyoto. She took issue with the fictional novel's portrayal of *geisha* and the suggestion that they served as prostitutes. Sharing her firsthand experiences, this revealing memoir offers an authentic glimpse into this secretive world, detailing the discipline, artistry, and dedication behind this iconic and traditional profession.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

WABI SABI: JAPANESE WISDOM FOR A PERFECTLY IMPERFECT LIFE (2018) by BETH KEMPTON

Exploring the Japanese philosophy of *Wabi-sabi*, a Japanese philosophy that finds beauty in imperfection and transience, this non-fiction book explores how this mentality and aesthetic can be applied to everyday life. Offering a refreshing perspective on slowing down, this book encourages readers to embrace simplicity and appreciate the moment.

This is a must-read for anyone seeking mindfulness in their life or who are merely curious about Japanese philosophies and how they are applied to everyday life.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

FICTION

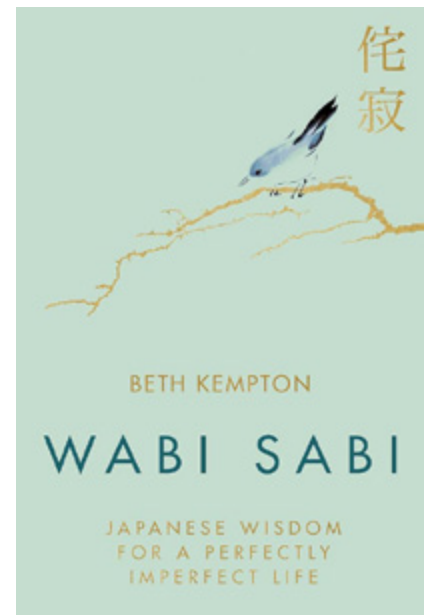
SHŌGUN (1975) by JAMES CLAVELL

A sweeping historical novel, *Shōgun* follows an English sailor who finds himself shipwrecked in 1600s Japan. As he navigates the country's rigid samurai society, he becomes embroiled in political intrigue and personal transformation. Though fiction, the story is based on historical figures and events, making it a thrilling way to understand feudal Japan—in particular the birth of the Tokugawa shogunate.

The historical and political backdrop also provides insight into the role of samurai in Japan, the spread of Christianity, and the presence of the Portuguese.

The novel was adapted for TV as a mini-series in 1980 and was popular with western audiences, though was not received well by Japanese viewers, facing criticism for its historical inaccuracies and portrayals. In 2024, a new adaptation was released by Hulu, receiving wide-spread international acclaim. Both adaptations won an Emmy—Outstanding Limited Series in 1981 and Outstanding Drama Series in 2024—a first in Emmys history.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).



FICTION

NO LONGER HUMAN (1973) by OSAMU DAZAI

Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* is the powerful yet dark story of a young man in post-war Japan, who struggles with identity, mental illness, addiction, and social alienation. The story is told through notebooks and journals left behind by the protagonist—Ōba—capturing his life from childhood until his late twenties, detailing the various struggles he faces at different stages.

While written about fictional characters, the novel is semi-autobiographical, reflecting the author's own internal battles with identity and the feeling of "otherness," along with his addiction, depression, guilt, and his lack of ability to conform within a changing society.

Offering deep insight into human nature and the burden of expectations, *No Longer Human* is a melancholic post-war novel, that is made painfully more poignant with the knowledge that the author committed suicide shortly before the story was published.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA (1999) by ARTHUR GOLDEN

Memoirs of a Geisha, written by Arthur Golden and the basis for the film, follows Chiyo, a young peasant girl sold into a Kyoto *geisha* house. Here, she transforms into the celebrated *geisha* Sayuri. Through her journey, the novel explores the rigorous training, intricate traditions, and the hidden world behind paper screens.

Told from Sayuri's perspective as she reflects on her life from New York's Waldorf Astoria, the book spans decades of Japanese history, shedding light on the *geisha*'s role in society. A compelling, beautifully written novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* offers a captivating glimpse into a world that remains shrouded in mystery.

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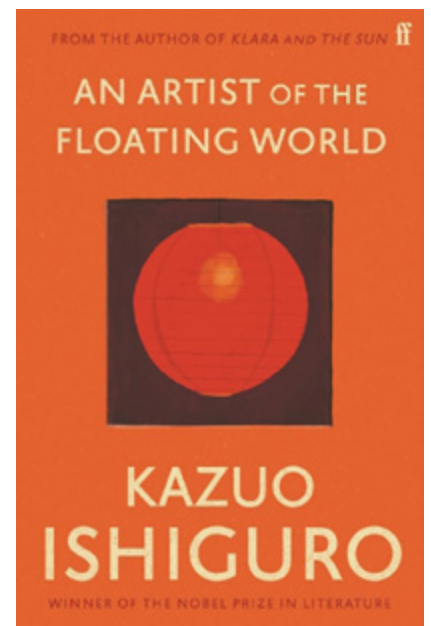
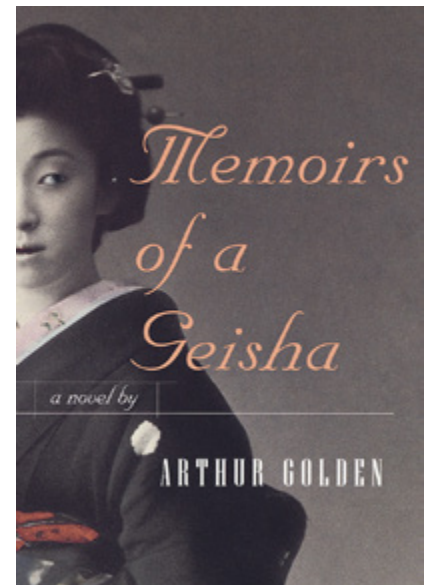
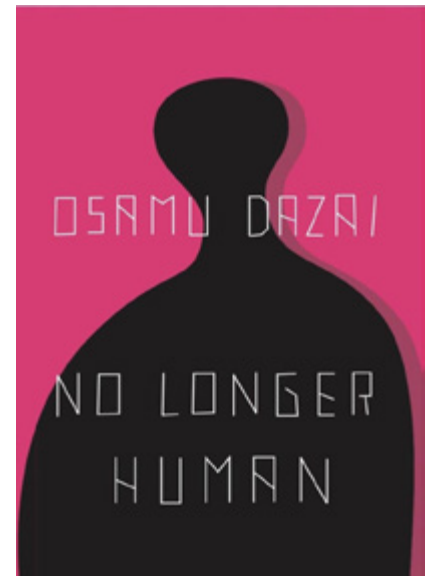
AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD (2022)

by KAZUO ISHIGURO

Shortlisted for the 1986 Booker Prize, *An Artist of the Floating World* is a profound historical fiction novel, set in post-World War II Japan. Following Masuji Ono, a once-revered artist whose propaganda work during the war has left him shunned and struggling with guilt, the story explores themes of personal responsibility and moral duty, shifting societal values (such as the roles of women and the declining status of elders), betrayal, and the lingering shadows of war.

Written by Kazuo Ishiguro—a Japanese-born British novelist, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, and one of the most renowned contemporary authors today—the novel uses autobiographical elements to enrich the narrative.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).



FICTION

BEFORE THE COFFEE GETS COLD (2020) by TOSHIKAZU KAWAGUCHI

Tucked away in a small back alley in Tokyo, the Funiculi Funicula café serves more than just coffee and tea—it provides visitors with the rare and unique opportunity to go back in time. Following four visitors as they navigate the rules of time travel and confront their pasts, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* is a touching story that explores themes of love, loss, regret, and the fleeting nature of time.

The first in a series, each of the subsequent books focuses on new sets of characters.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

PACHINKO (2017) by MIN JIN LEE

Spanning four generations of a Korean family in Japan, *Pachinko* is a deeply moving saga about identity, resilience, and discrimination. The novel sheds light on the struggles of Korean immigrants in Japan, who, despite being born in the country, face systemic prejudice and exclusion over generations.

With rich storytelling and historical depth, *Pachinko* is an essential read for understanding the complexities of race, nationality, and belonging in Japan. The novel was adapted by AppleTV in 2022, with the second season premiering in 2024.

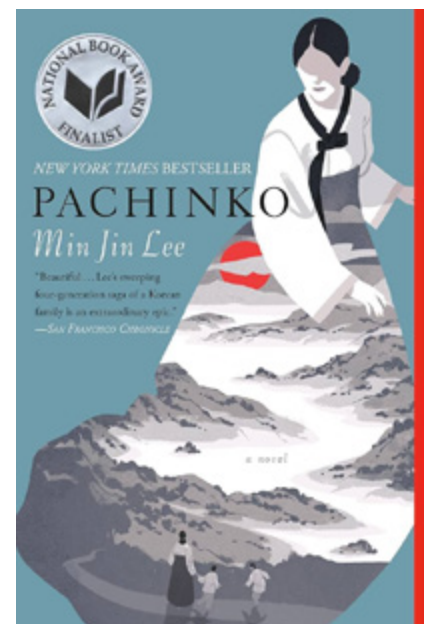
Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

NORWEGIAN WOOD (2000) by HARUKI MURAKAMI

An emotional coming-of-age novel, *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami follows Toru Watanabe, a university student in 1960s Tokyo, as he navigates love, loss, and self-discovery. Torn between his devotion to the fragile and melancholic Naoko and his growing attraction to the independent Midori, Toru grapples with themes of memory, grief, and identity throughout the novel. With its evocative prose and nostalgic atmosphere, *Norwegian Wood* captures the complexities of young love and the loneliness that often accompanies it.

Though the author Haruki Murakami had earned positive recognition for his earlier works, the success of *Norwegian Wood* made him an overnight sensation in Japan. After continuously being mobbed by adoring fans in cities and airports, Murakami left Japan for a period of time. Today, he is one of Japan's most famous and revered writers, receiving numerous local and international awards for his work.

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FICTION

CONVENIENCE STORE (2019) by SAYAKA MURATA

A bestseller in Japan, *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata offers a glimpse into contemporary Japanese society, highlighting the pressures for conformity still present. The story follows Keiko Furukura, a 36-year-old woman who has never quite fit in. She finds solace and structure working at Smile Mart, where every interaction is dictated by a manual. While Keiko is content, she is pressured to conform by finding a husband and a “real” job.

In *Convenience Store Woman*, Murata masterfully explores Japan’s rigid social expectations, work culture, and attitudes toward mental health in a way that is darkly humorous, deeply moving, and often painfully familiar.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

THE TALE FOR THE TIME BEING (2013) by RUTH OZEKI

Interweaving the lives of a bullied Japanese teenager in Tokyo and a Japanese American writer in Canada, *A Tale for the Time Being* blends fiction, philosophy, and history together into one compelling narrative. Touching on themes of cultural identity, bullying, family ties, and Buddhism, the novel also explores life in contemporary Tokyo—particularly after the 2011 tsunami.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

A TALE OF GENJI (11th Century) by MURASAKI SHIKIBU

Widely considered the world’s first novel, *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu is a literary masterpiece written in the early 11th century. The novel follows Hikaru Genji, the son of an emperor, who, despite being removed from the line of succession, leads a life of romantic escapades and political intrigue in Kyoto’s imperial court.

A lady-in-waiting and noblewoman, Murasaki Shikibu offers one of the best insights into Heian-era Japan, detailing court life, clothing, design aesthetics, entertainment, and daily practices. Whether seeking an epic novel or exploring Japanese history, *The Tale of Genji* is a literary staple.

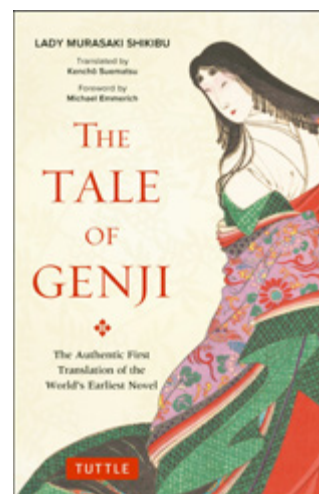
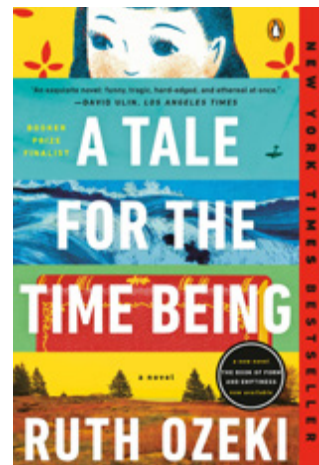
Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).

KITCHEN (2006) by BANANA YOSHIMOTO

A contemporary Japanese literary classic, *Kitchen* is a touching story about love, grief, and the healing power of home. The novel follows Mikage, a young woman who finds solace in cooking after the death of her grandmother. Orphaned from an early age and with the loss of her grandmother who raised her, Mikage feels utterly alone, leaning on family friends for support—in particular, Yuichi and his transgender mother, Eriko.

Kitchen beautifully captures modern Japanese life and themes of resilience and transformation with a tactful wit that doesn’t gloss over some of the more serious subject matters.

Buy now on [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) or from [Indigo](https://www.indigo.ca).



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PAGE 2

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The Roads to Sata: A 2000-Mile Walk Through Japan by Alan Booth.

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PAGE 3

A Brief History of Japan: Samurai, Shogun, and Zen by Jonathan Clements.

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Brief-History-Japan-Samurai-Extraordinary/dp/4805313897>

Hokkaido Highway Blues: Hitchhiking Japan by Will Ferguson.

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A Special Fate: Chiune Sugihara: Hero of the Holocaust by Alison Gold. Cover

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The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy by

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Geisha, A Life by Mineko Iwasaki.

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Geisha-Life-Mineko-Iwasaki/dp/0743444299>

Wabi Sabi: Japanese Wisdom for a Perfectly Imperfect Life by Beth Kempton.

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Shōgun by James Clavell.

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Part 1: <https://www.amazon.ca/Shogun-Part-One-James-Clavell/dp/BOCMYB29G8>

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PAGE 5

No Longer Human by Osamu Dazai

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Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Memoirs-Geisha-Arthur-Golden/dp/0679781587>

An Artist of the Floating World by Kazuo Ishiguro

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PAGE 6

Before the Coffee Gets Cold by Toshikazu Kawaguchi

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Before-Coffee-Gets-Cold-Novel/dp/1335430997>

Pachinko by Min Jin Lee

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Pachinko-National-Book-Award-Finalist/dp/1455563927>

Norwegian Wood by Haruki Murakami

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PAGE 7

Convenience Store Woman by Sayaka Murata

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A Tale for the Time Being by Ruth Ozeki

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The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Tale-Genji-Authentic-Translation-Earliest/dp/4805314648>

Kitchen by Banana Yoshimoto

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