Books and Cross-Cultural Understanding

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When I was a child, I felt proud when I read thick books. I loved fantasy novels, just like my mother, and often stayed up late reading under my blanket with a flashlight. On rainy days, I even took books to school and read in the library during lunch.

One day, a mobile library visited my school. That's when I found a book that opened from left to right. This was before the internet was common, so it was the first time eight-year-old Chris learned about a country called Japan. Looking back, I think it was a light novel translated into English. Later, I borrowed the only Japanese book at my town's library, but I couldn't picture the "black uniform with gold buttons" described in the story.

In junior high school, I started learning Japanese. In my third year, I joined a one-week exchange program at a Japanese school. As I rode my bicycle to school, I saw the same scenes described in that book—narrow roads and students in uniforms. The "black uniform with gold buttons" I couldn't imagine before was now real, worn by the boys at school. It was a Gakuran, of course.

In high school, I studied in Japan for a year. During the summer vacation I found a Japanese light novel at the local library. With my host father's dictionary (he was a Japanese teacher), I finished reading it over the summer vacation. The book showed everyday high school life in Japan, including jokes like "tsukkomi," which I didn't fully understand. Even after living there for six months, I was still learning new things from this book. One this in particular I was able to notice was a boy who often responded to things I said with "tsukkomi." I had thought he didn't like me because he often made these sharp comments, but after read that book, I realized that was just his way of having fun. Nishimoto-kun, I'm sorry!

This was a long story, but books introduced me to Japan and its culture. They do more than share words—they show the writer's background and values. This is true for fiction, nonfiction, and even translated books. Today, the internet lets us see many things but I also recommend reading a book as another way to experience another culture. Our university library and Aomori City libraries have many books in English. If you find one, why not give it a try?