Mrs. Nakamura's Contemporary Recommended Reading

(Book descriptions are from Goodreads.com)

Top Favorites

Many of you have asked me this year about my favorite book. I have too many favorites to answer, but I would say these seven are the contenders. (Full disclosure: if you ask me tomorrow, the list might be different.)

***State of Wonder*, Anne Patchett**

As Dr. Marina Singh embarks upon an uncertain odyssey into the insect-infested Amazon, she will be forced to surrender herself to the lush but forbidding world that awaits within the jungle. Charged with finding her former mentor Dr. Annick Swenson, a researcher who has disappeared while working on a valuable new drug, she will have to confront her own memories of tragedy and sacrifice as she journeys into the unforgiving heart of darkness.

***Cutting for Stone*, Abraham Verghese**

A sweeping, emotionally riveting first novel—an enthralling family saga of Africa and America, doctors and patients, exile and home.

***Atonement*, Ian McEwan**

On a hot summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses the flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant. But Briony's incomplete grasp of adult motives and her precocious imagination bring about a crime that will change all their lives, a crime whose repercussions Atonement follows through the chaos and carnage of World War II and into the close of the twentieth century.

***On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* Ocean Vuong**

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is a letter from a son to a mother who cannot read. Written when the speaker, Little Dog, is in his late twenties, the letter unearths a family's history that began before he was born — a history whose epicenter is rooted in Vietnam — and serves as a doorway into parts of his life his mother has never known, all of it leading to an unforgettable revelation. At once a witness to the fraught yet undeniable love between a single mother and her son, it is also a brutally honest exploration of race, class, and masculinity. Asking questions central to our American moment, immersed as we are in addiction, violence, and trauma, but undergirded by compassion and tenderness, On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is as much about the power of telling one's own story as it is about the obliterating silence of not being heard.

***The Time Traveler's Wife*, Audrey Niffenegger**
A funny, often poignant tale of boy meets girl with a twist: what if one of them couldn't stop slipping in and out of time? Highly original and imaginative, this debut novel raises questions about life, love, and the effects of time on relationships.

***Demon Copperhead*, Barbara Kingsolver**
Set in the mountains of southern Appalachia, this is the story of a boy born to a teenaged single mother in a single-wide trailer, with no assets beyond his dead father's good looks and copper-colored hair, a caustic wit, and a fierce talent for survival. In a plot that never pauses for breath, relayed in his own unsparing voice, he braves the modern perils of foster care, child labor, derelict schools, athletic success, addiction, disastrous loves, and crushing losses. Through all of it, he reckons with his own invisibility in a popular culture where even the superheroes have abandoned rural people in favor of cities.

***A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith**
The beloved American classic about a young girl's coming-of-age at the turn of the century, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is a poignant and moving tale filled with compassion and cruelty, laughter and heartache, crowded with life and people and incident. The story of young, sensitive, and idealistic Francie Nolan and her bittersweet formative years in the slums of Williamsburg has enchanted and inspired millions of readers for more than sixty years. By turns overwhelming, sublime, heartbreaking, and uplifting, the daily experiences of the unforgettable Nolans are raw with honesty and tenderly threaded with family connectedness -- in a work of literary art that brilliantly captures a unique time and place as well as incredibly rich moments of universal experience.

Fiction

***Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**
Purple Hibiscus is an exquisite novel about the emotional turmoil of adolescence, the powerful bonds of family, and the bright promise of freedom.

***We are All Completely Beside Ourselves,* Karen Joy Fowler**
Meet the Cooke family: Mother and Dad, Lowell, Rosemary and her unusual sister Fern. Rosemary begins her story in the middle. She has her reasons. “Until Fern’s expulsion...,” Rosemary says, “she was my twin, my funhouse mirror, my whirlwind other half and I loved her.” As a child, Rosemary never stopped talking. Then, something happened, and Rosemary wrapped herself in silence.

***The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver**
The Poisonwood Bible is a story told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. They carry with them everything they believe they will need from home, but soon find that all of it

-- from garden seeds to Scripture -- is calamitously transformed on African soil. What follows is a suspenseful epic of one family's tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa.

***Under the Feet of Jesus,* Helena Maria Viramontes**
A moving and powerful novel about the lives of the men, women, and children who endure a second-class existence and labor under dangerous conditions as migrant workers in California's fields.

***There There*, Tommy Orange**
Tommy Orange's wondrous and shattering novel follows twelve characters from Native communities: all traveling to the Big Oakland Powwow, all connected to one another in ways they may not yet realize.

***Your House Will Pay*, Steph Cha**
A powerful and taut novel about racial tensions in LA, following two families—one Korean-American, one African-American—grappling with the effects of a decades-old crime.

***The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath**
The Bell Jar chronicles the crack-up of Esther Greenwood: brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under—maybe for the last time. Sylvia Plath masterfully draws the reader into Esther's breakdown with such intensity that Esther's insanity becomes completely real and even rational, as probable and accessible an experience as going to the movies. Such deep penetration into the dark and harrowing corners of the psyche is an extraordinary accomplishment and has made The Bell Jar a haunting American classic.

***A Gentleman in Moscow*, Amor Towles**
In 1922, Count Alexander Rostov is deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a Bolshevik tribunal, and is sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin. Rostov, an indomitable man of erudition and wit, has never worked a day in his life, and must now live in an attic room while some of the most tumultuous decades in Russian history are unfolding outside the hotel's doors. Unexpectedly, his reduced circumstances provide him entry into a much larger world of emotional discovery.

***Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng**
Little Fires Everywhere explores the weight of secrets, the nature of art and identity, and the ferocious pull of motherhood--and the danger of believing that following the rules can avert disaster.

***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Taylor Jenkins Reid**
Aging and reclusive Hollywood movie icon Evelyn Hugo is finally ready to tell the truth about her glamorous and scandalous life. But when she chooses unknown magazine reporter Monique Grant for the job, no one is more astounded than Monique herself. Why her? Why now?

***Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald*, Theresa Ann Fowler**
A dazzling novel that captures all of the romance, glamour, and tragedy of the first flapper, Zelda Fitzgerald.

***Alice I Have Been*, Melanie Benjamin**
Few works of literature are as universally beloved as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Now, in this spellbinding historical novel, we meet the young girl whose bright spirit sent her on an unforgettable trip down the rabbit hole–and the grown woman whose story is no less enthralling.

***A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan**
Jennifer Egan's spellbinding interlocking narratives circle the lives of Bennie Salazar, an aging former punk rocker and record executive, and Sasha, the passionate, troubled young woman he employs. Although Bennie and Sasha never discover each other's pasts, the reader does, in intimate detail, along with the secret lives of a host of other characters whose paths intersect with theirs, over many years, in locales as varied as New York, San Francisco, Naples, and Africa.

***Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri**
Navigating between the Indian traditions they've inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's elegant, touching stories seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. In "A Temporary Matter," published in *The New Yorker*, a young Indian-American couple faces the heartbreak of a stillborn birth while their Boston neighborhood copes with a nightly blackout. In the title story, an interpreter guides an American family through the India of their ancestors and hears an astonishing confession. Lahiri writes with deft cultural insight reminiscent of Anita Desai and a nuanced depth that recalls Mavis Gallant.

***Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Lisa See**
In nineteenth-century China, in a remote Hunan county, a girl named Lily, at the tender age of seven, is paired with a laotong, "old same," in an emotional match that will last a lifetime. The laotong, Snow Flower, introduces herself by sending Lily a silk fan on which she's painted a poem in nu shu, a unique language that Chinese women created in order to communicate in secret, away from the influence of men. As the years pass, Lily and Snow Flower send messages on fans, compose stories on handkerchiefs, reaching out of isolation to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Together, they endure the agony of foot-binding, and reflect upon their arranged marriages, shared loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their deep friendship suddenly threatens to tear apart.

***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Mark Haddon**
Although gifted with a superbly logical brain, for fifteen-year-old Christopher everyday interactions and admonishments have little meaning. He lives on patterns, rules, and a diagram kept in his pocket. Then one day, a neighbor's dog, Wellington, is killed and his

carefully constructive universe is threatened. Christopher sets out to solve the murder in the style of his favourite (logical) detective, Sherlock Holmes. What follows makes for a novel that is funny, poignant and fascinating in its portrayal of a person whose curse and blessing are a mind that perceives the world entirely literally.

***Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi**
A novel of breathtaking sweep and emotional power that traces three hundred years in Ghana and along the way also becomes a truly great American novel. Extraordinary for its exquisite language, its implacable sorrow, its soaring beauty, and for its monumental portrait of the forces that shape families and nations, *Homegoing* heralds the arrival of a major new voice in contemporary fiction.

***Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**
Ifemelu and Obinze are young and in love when they depart military-ruled Nigeria for the West. Beautiful, self-assured Ifemelu heads for America, where despite her academic success, she is forced to grapple with what it means to be black for the first time. Quiet, thoughtful Obinze had hoped to join her, but with post-9/11 America closed to him, he instead plunges into a dangerous, undocumented life in London. Fifteen years later, they reunite in a newly democratic Nigeria, and reignite their passion—for each other and for their homeland.

***All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr**
From the highly acclaimed, multiple award-winning Anthony Doerr, the stunningly beautiful instant *New York Times* bestseller about a blind French girl and a German boy whose paths collide in occupied France as both try to survive the devastation of World War II.

***Where'd You Go, Bernadette,* Maria Semple**
When her daughter Bee claims a family trip to Antarctica as a reward for perfect grades, Bernadette, a fiercely intelligent shut-in, throws herself into preparations for the trip. But worn down by years of trying to live the Seattle life she never wanted, Ms. Fox is on the brink of a meltdown. And after a school fundraiser goes disastrously awry at her hands, she disappears, leaving her family to pick up the pieces--which is exactly what Bee does, weaving together an elaborate web of emails, invoices, and school memos that reveals a secret past Bernadette has been hiding for decades. *Where'd You Go Bernadette* is an ingenious and unabashedly entertaining novel about a family coming to terms with who they are and the power of a daughter's love for her mother.

***Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng**
A profoundly moving story of family, secrets, and longing, *Everything I Never Told You* is both a gripping page-turner and a sensitive family portrait, uncovering the ways in which mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives struggle, all their lives, to understand one another.

***The Martian*, Andy Weir**
Six days ago, astronaut Mark Watney became one of the first people to walk on Mars. Now, he's sure he'll be the first person to die there.

***Exit West,* Mohsin Hamid**
In a country teetering on the brink of civil war, two young people meet—sensual, fiercely independent Nadia and gentle, restrained Saeed. They embark on a furtive love affair and are soon cloistered in a premature intimacy by the unrest roiling their city. When it explodes, turning familiar streets into a patchwork of checkpoints and bomb blasts, they begin to hear whispers about doors—doors that can whisk people far away, if perilously and for a price. As the violence escalates, Nadia and Saeed decide that they no longer have a choice. Leaving their homeland and their old lives behind, they find a door and step through.

***The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien**
In 1979, Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* - a novel about the Vietnam War - won the National Book Award. In this, his second work of fiction about Vietnam, O'Brien's unique artistic vision is again clearly demonstrated. Neither a novel nor a short story collection, it is an arc of fictional episodes, taking place in the childhoods of its characters, in the jungles of Vietnam and back home in America two decades later.

***In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez**
Set during the waning days of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic in 1960, this extraordinary novel tells the story of the Mirabal sisters, three young wives and mothers who are assassinated after visiting their jailed husbands.

***The House in the Cerulean Sea*, T.J. Klune**
Linus Baker leads a quiet, solitary life. At forty, he lives in a tiny house with a devious cat and his old records. As a Case Worker at the Department in Charge Of Magical Youth, he spends his days overseeing the well-being of children in government-sanctioned orphanages. When Linus is unexpectedly summoned by Extremely Upper Management he's given a curious and highly classified assignment: travel to Marsyas Island Orphanage, where six dangerous children reside: a gnome, a sprite, a wyvern, an unidentifiable green blob, a were-Pomeranian, and the Antichrist. Linus must set aside his fears and determine whether or not they're likely to bring about the end of days.

YA Fiction

***Good Girl's Guide to Murder,* Holly Jackson**
The case is closed. Five years ago, schoolgirl Andie Bell was murdered by Sal Singh. The police know he did it. Everyone in town knows he did it. But having grown up in the same small town that was consumed by the murder, Pippa Fitz-Amobi isn't so sure. When she chooses the case as the topic for her final year project, she starts to uncover secrets that someone in town desperately wants to stay hidden. And if the real killer is still out there, how far will they go to keep Pip from the truth?

***The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas**
Sixteen-year-old Starr lives in two worlds: the poor neighbourhood where she was born and raised and her posh high school in the suburbs. The uneasy balance between them is shattered when Starr is the only witness to the fatal shooting of her unarmed best friend, Khalil, by a police officer. Now what Starr says could destroy her community. It could also get her killed.

***If I Stay*, Gayle Forman**
Choices. Seventeen-year-old Mia is faced with some tough ones: Stay true to her first love—music—even if it means losing her boyfriend and leaving her family and friends behind? Then one February morning Mia goes for a drive with her family, and in an instant, everything changes. Suddenly, all the choices are gone, except one. And it's the only one that matters.

***We Were Liars*, E. Lockhart**
We Were Liars is a modern, sophisticated suspense novel from *New York Times* bestselling author, National Book Award finalist, and Printz Award honoree E. Lockhart.

***Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jesmyn Ward**
Jesmyn Ward's first novel since her National Book Award–winning *Salvage the Bones*, this singular American writer brings the archetypal road novel into rural twenty-first-century America. An intimate portrait of a family and an epic tale of hope and struggle, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* journeys through Mississippi's past and present, examining the ugly truths at the heart of the American story and the power—and limitations—of family bonds.

***I Capture the Castle*, Dodie Smith**
Through six turbulent months of 1934, 17-year-old Cassandra Mortmain keeps a journal, filling three notebooks with sharply funny yet poignant entries about her home, a ruined Suffolk castle, and her eccentric and penniless family. By the time the last diary shuts, there have been great changes in the Mortmain household, not the least of which is that Cassandra is deeply, hopelessly, in love.

***I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Erika Sanchez**
Perfect Mexican daughters do not go away to college. And they do not move out of their parents' house after high school graduation. Perfect Mexican daughters never abandon their family. But Julia is not your perfect Mexican daughter. That was Olga's role.

Non-Fiction/Memoir

***Crying in H Mart,* Michelle Zauner**

Michelle Zauner tells of growing up one of the few Asian American kids at her school in Eugene, Oregon; of struggling with her mother's particular, high expectations of her; of a painful adolescence; of treasured months spent in her grandmother's tiny apartment in Seoul, where she and her mother would bond, late at night, over heaping plates of food.

***How the Word is Passed*, Clint Smith**
Beginning in his own hometown of New Orleans, Clint Smith leads the reader through an unforgettable tour of monuments and landmarks-those that are honest about the past and those that are not-that offer an intergenerational story of how slavery has been central in shaping our nation′s collective history, and ourselves.

***The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot**
Her name was Henrietta Lacks, but scientists know her as HeLa. She was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine. The first "immortal" human cells grown in culture, they are still alive today, though she has been dead for more than sixty years. If you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, they'd weigh more than 50 million metric tons—as much as a hundred Empire State Buildings. HeLa cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the atom bomb's effects; helped lead to important advances like in vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene mapping; and have been bought and sold by the billions. Yet Henrietta Lacks remains virtually unknown, buried in an unmarked grave.

***Educated,* Tara Westover**
Tara Westover was 17 the first time she set foot in a classroom. Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, she prepared for the end of the world by stockpiling home-canned peaches and sleeping with her "head-for-the-hills bag". In the summer she stewed herbs for her mother, a midwife and healer, and in the winter she salvaged in her father′s junkyard.

***Becoming*, Michelle Obama**
In her memoir, a work of deep reflection and mesmerizing storytelling, Michelle Obama invites readers into her world, chronicling the experiences that have shaped her—from her childhood on the South Side of Chicago to her years as an executive balancing the demands of motherhood and work, to her time spent at the world's most famous address. With unerring honesty and lively wit, she describes her triumphs and her disappointments, both public and private, telling her full story as she has lived it—in her own words and on her own terms. Warm, wise, and revelatory, Becoming is the deeply personal reckoning of a woman of soul and substance who has steadily defied expectations—and whose story inspires us to do the same.

Poetry

***Counting Descent*, Clint Smith**

Clint Smith′s debut poetry collection, Counting Descent, is a coming of age story that seeks to complicate our conception of lineage and tradition. Smith explores the cognitive dissonance that results from belonging to a community that unapologetically celebrates black humanity while living in a world that often renders blackness a caricature of fear. His poems move fluidly across personal and political histories, all the while reflecting on the social construction of our lived experiences. Smith brings the reader on a powerful journey forcing us to reflect on all that we learn growing up, and all that we seek to unlearn moving forward.

***No Matter the Wreckage*, Sarah Kay**
Following the success of her breakout poem, ″B,″ Sarah Kay releases her debut collection of poetry featuring work from the first decade of her career. No Matter the Wreckage presents readers with new and beloved work that showcases Kay′s knack for celebrating family, love, travel, history, and unlikely love affairs between inanimate objects (″Toothbrush to the Bicycle Tire″), among other curious topics. Both fresh and wise, Kay′s poetry allows readers to join in on her journey of discovering herself and the world around her. It′s an honest and powerful collection.

***The Poet X,* Elizabeth Acevedo**
A young girl in Harlem discovers slam poetry as a way to understand her mother's religion and her own relationship to the world. Debut novel of renowned slam poet Elizabeth Acevedo.

***American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*, Terrance Hayes**
In seventy poems bearing the same title, Terrance Hayes explores the meanings of American, of assassin, and of love in the sonnet form. Written during the first two hundred days of the Trump presidency, these poems are haunted by the country′s past and future eras and errors, its dreams and nightmares. Inventive, compassionate, hilarious, melancholy, and bewildered--the wonders of this new collection are irreducible and stunning.

***Sailing Alone Around the Room*, Billy Collins**
These poems show Collins at his best, performing the kinds of distinctive poetic maneuvers that have delighted and fascinated so many readers. They may begin in curiosity and end in grief; they may start with irony and end with lyric transformation; they may, and often do, begin with the everyday and end in the infinite. Possessed of a unique voice that is at once plain and melodic, Billy Collins has managed to enrich American poetry while greatly widening the circle of its audience.

***Citizen Illegal*, Jose Olivarez**
Citizen Illegal is a revealing portrait of life as a first generation immigrant, a celebration of Chicano joy, a shout against erasure, and a vibrant re-imagining of Mexican American life.