



Gatherer of Clouds

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The magnificent concluding volume of The Initiate Brother. This fantasy interweaves Asian culture, mysticism, and martial arts with magic in an epic story of war, deception, illicit passion, and mystery. Initiate Brother Shuyun, spiritual advisor to the military governor of the province of Seh, receives a shocking message from the barbarian lands--the massive army of the Golden Khan is poised at their border. And it may fall to one young monk with extraordinary powers to save the Empire.

Gatherer of Clouds Details

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Author : Sean Russell

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From Reader Review Gatherer of Clouds for online ebook

Kathleen says

The story is complete now in part two of the duology: The Cloud Gatherer. I read both books back to back and would recommend them to readers who don't mind a slightly slow pace, some philosophy, and a little poetry.

I read and listened. Narration is fine, but not brilliant.

A medieval Asian tale (Japanese-Chinese mix) with the slightest fantastical bent, set in a mythical land (see maps) with lords and ladies, peasants and emperors, warriors and monks, politics, lies, and conspiracies, murder, greed, and ambition.

The darkness is offset by hot cha with several likable and honorable characters who feature across both books. Characterization and character development is a strength, esp for Jaku Tadamoto. Relationships among the allies are heartwarming, and the romance doesn't overwhelm. The plot is unpredictable and twisty, if slow at times. Most events and actions are seen thru the teachings of the Enlightened One, Lord Botahara, The Perfect Master, and a religion similar to Buddhism (but the book is not preachy).

The duology rings almost of speculative history with names and places changed, but not quite.

Told in third-person -- the only way to travel, preferably by sail, as one poem portrays:
“Grand Canal” by Lady Nishima Fanisan Shonto

Our boat of gumwood and dark locust
Her paint scaling like serpent's skin,
Sets forth into the throng of craft
On the Grand Canal.
Uncounted travelers,
Uncounted desires
Borne over blue water.
Only the funeral barge
Covered in white petals
Appears to know its destination.

Main Characters:

(Last names go before first names in this culture, and the honorific suffix "sum" may be attached to show friendship or endearment, sometimes replacing the final syllable, so Nishima becomes Nishi-sum)

House Shonto:

Lord Shonto Motoru /Motoro-sum/ Mito-sum

Shonto's adult son Shonto Shokan

Shonto's adult step-daughter Lady Nishima (her friends Lady Kitsura and artist Lady Okara)

Shonto's steward Kamu (one-armed, a famous swordsman in earlier days, meticulous with details)

Shonto's merchant-vassal Tanaka

Shonto's security: Rohku Saicha, Captain of the Guard, 47 years old. (His son Corporal Rohku is a member of Lord Shonto's personal guard.)

Shonto's ally General Hojo Masakado

House Yamaku (displaced the Hanama Dynasty):

Emperor Akantsu II, Son of Heaven

Emperor's consort Sonsa (dancer) Osha-sum

Emperor's men from House Jaku:

General Jaku Katta, advisor to Emperor and Captain of the Imperial Guard, aka "The Black Tiger"

"The youngest of the three Jaku brothers, Yasata had neither the martial skill of Katta nor the intellectual brilliance of Tadamoto."

Jinjoh Monastery / Botahist Brothers:

Supreme Master Brother Nodaku (island monastery)

Brother Shuyun, young neophyte/ initiate

Brother Sotura, Chi Quan instructor

Brother Hutto, Primate of the Floating City of Yankura

Brother Satake, former spiritual advisor to Shonto

etc.

Priory Sisters:

Prioress, Sister Saeja (old nun, head of the Order)

Sister Sutso, Saeja's secretary

Senior Sister Morima

Junior Acolyte Tesseko

Senior Sister Gatsa

Lord Komawara from Seh province:

He bowed. "I am Komawara Samyamu." Ah, yes, Lord Shonto thought, the same slim build and the long thin nose. If this youth is anything like his father, his apparent lack of muscle is deceptive. The old Komawara had been a strong swordsman and lightning fast.

Metaphorosis says

reviews.metaphorosis.com

3.5 stars

Sent away from the capital in a nominal propmtion, Shonto Motoru finds the threat from barbarian tribes to be a very real danger to the Empire of Wa. The barbarians have support from unexpected places, and Shonto must decide how to respond, when any course looks like treachery to the suspicious Emperor. Shonto's Spiritual Advisor, the talented monk Shuyun, faces his own dilemmas as he questions aspects of his faith just as others look to him for guidance.

The prequel to this book, *The Initiate Brother*, was a vast, highly political book that succeeded through expert worldbuilding and a narrow focus on people. This book takes the relationships further, but with less success.

Russell has a lot to work with here - all those interesting characters he established in the first book, growing gradually more closely knit - and he does a lot with it. The individuals and their relationships remain a big draw, and Russell does an excellent job of showing larger events without ever losing his focus on the people affected by them. But the political side of the story simply went on too long for my taste. There's movement is more of troops than of spirits, and the logistical machinations take their toll. While Russell's choices are credible, after a while they cease to be interesting. This may be because he shifts his focus away from some of the action heroes of the first book, and more toward other, more social actors. Shuyun plays in both realms.

Disappointingly, Russell wraps things up fairly quickly (for a book this size), as if he recognized that he'd gone on too long. I'd have much preferred much less lead up, and a much longer winding down. That said, the books' central mystery is credibly explained, and Russell credits his readers with reasonable intelligence; there's a lot implied but unspoken, in line with the understated nature of the prose.

All in all, a good book and a good series. It's probably best read and purchased as a single volume. If you've read Russell's other (very good) books, you'll like this earlier work. If you haven't this is a good place to start. Recommended for anyone who enjoys subtlety in their fantasy.

Made DNA says

This book, while an interesting, well-thought out, deep tale suffers from a lack of knowledge of Japanese culture (on which it is 90% based) on the part of the writer.

Touted as set in a "magical fantasy Orient" (a word I personally despise), it tells the story of Brother Shuyun (from *The Initiate brother*), Lord Shonto (governor of the province of Seh) and a large cast of others as they discover and fight off a massive invasion by desert clans who live to the north. Claiming to be the saviors of the Empire of Wa (via dethroning the Emperor), the desert warriors mount an attack in Seh first.

A tale of war, deception, treachery, bravery, battle, and mystic intrigue, it is a well written tale. Colorful and vivid, it will leave an impression on readers. Too bad it's marred by the lack of knowledge or disregarding of knowledge by the author. For this, it loses 2 stars.

Dan says

2018 reread: A lengthy read but very enjoyable.

Scott Wozniak says

This story is profound. And the writing is masterfully done. So why 3 stars? Because while the themes were

moving and the paragraphs beautiful, this book spends WAY too much time on non-essential elements, such as side characters (we really didn't need scene after scene with the consort of the Emperor) and poetry (the few tasteful poems of the first book became frequent and long).

The ending leaves me not sure if I'm happy or not. That's not bad in and of itself--it's a complex tale. But it's wasn't strong enough to make the slow journey there worth it for me.

I'm sorry to review it like this. I came to love the central characters deeply. But I can't recommend this book without noting it's flaws. If you don't mind a leisurely read, this book is great. But it won't grip your attention. You'll have to earn this ending.

Kian says

I don't know how i am both happy and sad by the ending.

Robin Tell-Drake says

A flawed but beloved old favorite from college, one I worry will pass from the collective memory sooner than it ought. That said, I must confess that I'm giving it stars based, I suppose, on a separate scale from that I might apply to Beowulf, say, or Dubliners. Perhaps--and I am realizing this as I consider the question of how many stars to award here--I use a five-star scale not so much as an absolute range of value applicable across all books, but as a measure of the extent to which a book met the expectations with which I came to it. Making it all doubly subjective, but I think that really is a more honest assessment of how I've been thinking of it. Nice to realize that.

And in that light, having approached *Initiate Brother* as a fantasy novel (I regard it and its nominal sequel, *Gatherer of Clouds*, as one novel broken into parts for publisher's purposes), it acquitted itself very well indeed. Russell seems to be finding his way as he writes the chapters in order, so that the first is the wobbliest. The plot, baroque enough to require real care in following it, has some points that don't quite add up. But there is also a subtlety there that is probably the book's greatest strength: you really do need to pay attention to the action as the pieces move around the broad board of imperial intrigue, or you won't notice when this or that agent reports to his superior with small lies and omissions that are our only warning of that agent's secret agenda, which may matter down the road. After one misstep in that first chapter, Russell has the authorial assurance necessary to lie to the reader--rather than try and tiptoe around a narrative lie, and thereby betray his plans for what will follow.

It's a large ensemble cast, with significant characters still being introduced well over halfway through the action, and the main characters are pretty good. Shonto, almost as much the main character as titular Brother Shuyun, is an interesting compromise--he is presented as a master strategist, but never in the book will he execute any masterful strategies. Mostly he shows himself to be resolute, coolheaded, principled, blessed with superlative staff, and skilled at divining the truth among rumors. Which will do for a hero, surely. But in battle the credit always goes to his retainers, or to his good fortune in having Shuyun at his service. Small matter. The nature of his repute going into the story isn't as important as his lordly mien, and his position as lightning rod for the wrath of a vindictive emperor.

And so on. Our Lady Nishima is compelling, if something of a feminist anachronism (if it makes any sense to cry anachronism in a backdrop that's a curious blend of Japanese language, dress and culture on a Chinese geographic and political map). Lord Komawara is fine as a spirited young romantic lead. The emperor brings a lively menace to everything. The brothers Jaku, his servants, are vivid, perhaps at the cost of watching the author enjoy himself too much in describing them. The many supporting characters are deftly and carefully drawn.

I'm rereading this just lately, in an intermittent way. We'll see if it stands up. I am noticing right away, though, the the book slows for a few chapters after the second, and before Shuyun reappears I am impatient for his arrival. He is the life of the story, his predicament as he ventures from his cloister into a world that seems like more than illusion. Half Zen master and half Shaolin monk, he is the only one on the trail of the big wheel that's turning, virtually forgotten behind all the machinations of warfare. And his character, despite being wrapped in something of a martial arts caricature, is probably the most nuanced of the lot.

Immensely enjoyable, warts and all. I'll update if reading through it again should change my view of it.

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

Gatherer of Clouds is the sequel to Sean Russell's *The Initiate Brother*, a story which is not so much about the Initiate Brother Shuyun, spiritual advisor to Lord Shonto, as it is about the entire Shonto household — a household that is seen as a threat by an insecure emperor. And with good reason, for Lord Shonto is an honorable, intelligent, and insightful man who has raised his children to be his equals and who has surrounded himself with a competent and loyal staff and several clever allies.

As the story opens, Shonto, governor of the northern province of She, is preparing for a massive barbarian invasion that the emperor refuses to believe in (since he only paid for a small invasion in order to get rid of Shonto). Should Shonto stay in the north, as ordered, and be wiped out by the barbarian horde? Or should he let his province fall and retreat toward the capital to raise an army that may have a chance to defeat the invaders? This latter option seems the only way to save the empire of Wa, but the emperor will certainly declare treason if Shonto starts recruiting soldiers. There are hard choices and harder sacrifices to make, not just for Shonto, but for everyone involved.

While reading *Gatherer of Clouds*, I was completely immersed in the lives of Lord Shonto, Brother Shuyun, Lady Nishima, Lord Komawara, and the Jaku brothers, as well as the beauty and elegance of their lifestyles. Each of Sean Russell's diverse set of characters is vivid, unique, and realistic, and they all learn much about themselves and each other as the stress ramps up. Because we spend so much time with them, and because they feel so real, their inner struggles become our inner struggles. Would we be willing to sacrifice love for duty? When is it right to disobey (or murder!) a sovereign ruler? Are there times when it is better to kill than to heal? What is true religion and how do we recognize when it has become corrupt? When does loyalty become dishonorable? When principles conflict, how do we know which principle is highest? I found myself considering each of these questions as I read *Gatherer of Clouds*.

In addition to making us think about some tough ideas, Russell also shows us how legends are made. Every one of his characters has the potential to become either a hero or a villain, and Russell shows us that it's our daily choices that add up to determine our destiny and how we'll be perceived by history.

If you enjoy character-centered epic fantasy with lots of political intrigue, Sean Russell's *The Initiate Brother* is a great choice. I listened to Blackstone Audio's version and can recommend this format. This was my first experience with Sean Russell's writing, but I'll definitely be exploring more of his work in the future.

Tracy says

In many ways, part two of this book is far superior to the first, but I have tried to review them as one story. Because, unlike a serial series, a sequential series hangs on each other. You cannot have the Return of the King without the Fellowship of the Rings.

Here we find resolution, and the answers to all the question Russell has raised, and the happy ending we all secretly have been waiting for.

Stevie Kincade says

Gatherer of clouds is the sequel to *The Initiate Brother* a court-intrigue Fantasy set in an unspecified ancient Asian setting. A story of mystic monks, ambitions failed and realised, military strategy and political manouvering, Russell presents a fully realised world and a large cast of characters.

I enjoyed *The Initiate Brother* quite a bit, but it somehow took me 6 months to get around to *Gatherer of Clouds*. Given the complex plot machinations and the number of characters involved I expected to be a little lost upon starting the sequel but I quickly settled back into Russell's world.

I think the best attribute of these books is the world itself. It is never narrowed down to ancient China or Japan, it takes place in it's own unique setting. The interactions between the empire and its provinces and the various religious sects make for a non-typical setting and cast of characters for this game of thrones.

Overall I enjoyed this series and would recommend it while noting that the 2nd volume wasn't quite as riveting as the first. There is a certain formula that becomes more apparent in "Gatherer of Clouds" as we see the themes of loyalty no matter the cost, duty to family and faith, maintenance of propriety repeated again and again.

The pacing of *The Initiate Brother* was well plotted, with the first book ending in a giant crescendo. *Gatherer of Clouds* starts much more deliberately and seemingly started with a "reset" to the pace. I found the ending to be effective and satisfying but some of the start and middle was a little tedious before the pace picked up considerably.

The only major problem I had with the plot was that the ladies of the story are all propriety and exquisite manners, it would cast shame upon the house to show even a glimpse of the female form under their many layered kimonos. However when the plot required we basically had the equivalent of them doing the bump and grind on the dance floor and a "come hither" stare to the lucky men in question.

I went into narrator Elijah Alexander's performance at length in my review of *The Initiate Brother* so I will just reiterate: this was a difficult assignment and I enjoyed his voice acting 99% of the time.

gradedog says

The sequel to The Intiate Brother. I enjoyed this conclusion to the story of Shuyun and the Shonto and their allies and enemies. I found it got a little muddled in the middle but ended well. I have only read a few fantasies with Asian settings and I think this is my favorite.

Cadeyrn Kearney says

No book has ever struck me emotionally like this. It's a great book. It's a magnificent work of art. But the deaths cut deep. One death very specifically. I did not expect the great man, the father, the son, the teacher, to sacrifice even his life.

I have no closure and that's what pains the most. I have no closure. It was unexpected and happened off screen. Why?

I recommend this book to all those who delight in fantasy.

Mark says

3.5 if possible, but I gave him that extra 1/2 point cuz it's xmas(as i write this). This was a good book. There were a few things that bugged me a little, but nothing is perfect. The main female character was a little too self absorbed for my liking considering everything going on around her. Her obsession with having sex with Shuyun got on my nerves. Leave the poor monk alone you tart! The emperor was a little too 'over the top' paranoid. So much so that it was a little unbelievable. A little more detail could have been given to the barbarians to the north. Brother Shuyun was by far the most compelling character, and not enough time was spent on him. All this probably would have warranted a 3rd book. Russel spent a little too much time on non essential characters like the merchant, Osha's feelings, and some non essential sisters. But other characters surprised me in a good way. Komawara was the most fun to follow on his journey. Shokan's story line was interesting, but could have used a little more detail about his motivations and the mountain people. Lord Shonto (who i feel this book was more about) was just as interesting as in the first book. I thought the ending was really what pushed this book up to 4 stars for me. I must admit I got a little misty over Komawara's situation at the end.

Spirit-Soul-Body (Kiran) says

It is a good read. Book to be recommended ...

early part was not as exciting as even book-I but later part sometimes crosses to novel - " Sh?gun".

ohh, I am happy that found and read the book.

this book has so many deep **characters** gives you joy even long time after.

"I believe, as you have said, that Jaku Tadamoto was an honorable man torn between honor and loyalty and love. In a lifetime of service to the Shonto I have never once felt so torn."

"we will never know if you fell into their hands without intending to or whether you chose to take your terrible weapon out among our enemies so that others might live. When I think of your fate, Shimeko-sum, I am gripped by its horror. Among all the brave, all the heroes of this pointless war, you alone went into battle without armor, without protection. Only you risked the destruction of your spirit. May Botahara rest you and protect your soul."

"Art, true art is a force for compassion and tranquillity."

Let us have an Empire ruled by compassion rather than greed and warfare. Let us have art in the fabric of our lives.

"It is the terrible thing about war; it sends the most innocent into the field and strips their souls bare of this innocence."

"You do not understand loyalty, Katta-sum. You think it is something one owes to another, but it is not so. Loyalty to principles is the essence of all honor."

Kamal Syed says

The sequel to The Initiate Brother, the story picks up immediately after the conclusion of the first book. This book contains more action and concludes the plotline of the first book, though I have to say that I found the wrap-up of the story-line of the invading desert army, to be very short and ultimately disappointing. Though I can understand that it was really just a thematic reason to drive the events of the story, the character of "The Great Khan" of the barbarians, so far unglimmed, was given a very brief moment in the sunlight before disappearing again.

Also, one of the main characters of the story - Lord Shonto Motoru, is given a very unsatisfying ending, dying "off camera" in a way that may be heroic, but seems futile. Perhaps that was part of the message, about the random horror of war, where death plays no favorites.

I don't want to leave an impression of disappointment. The book has many flaws, especially for someone who wants to see loose threads tied up, and I am hoping (though 20+ years later, perhaps in vain) for a continuation of the story in another duology. Its definitely a book to add to your list of must-reads.

A bonus for us Canadians, the author is a Toronto boy, though now is lives in Vancouver. Its always great to read fellow Canadian authors.

