



# The Initiate Brother

*Sean Russell*

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## **The Initiate Brother** Sean Russell

Plague and warfare has swept across the Orient, ravaging the ancient kingdom of Wa, devastating the royal line, and leaving a new dynasty on the throne--a new Emperor, Akantsu, filled with fear of all who might seek to wrest the Empire from his grasp. Among those out of favor with the new liege is the Order of the Botahist Monks, whose mystical powers have enabled them to hold positions as Spiritual Advisers to the Imperial court for nearly ten centuries. But Emperor Akantsu fears none so greatly as he does Lord Shonto, the brilliant leader of the most important of the Old Families, whose influence could rally the Great Houses against the throne and whose adopted daughter, the beautiful and talented Lady Nishima, is the last surviving member of the old royal family.

Sent to be military Governor of a northern border province long threatened by barbarian invaders, Lord Shonto knows he is being lured to his death. But Akantsu has underestimated his foe, for not only is Lord Shonto the greatest military genius of the age, but he has with him a Spiritual Adviser from the Botahist Order--a young man gifted with extraordinary martial skills and magical abilities, Initiate Brother Shuyun. And even Lord Shonto does not realize the true potential of this young monk. Only time will reveal that Shuyun's magical powers have not seen their equal in nearly a thousand years--not since the Perfect Master himself walked the paths of the Empire...

## **The Initiate Brother Details**

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Author : Sean Russell

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## From Reader Review *The Initiate Brother* for online ebook

### Femmy says

I really wanted to like this book as it has a Japanese/Chinese setting that I rarely find in the fantasy novels I've read. But unfortunately the story just didn't work for me.

First of all, the story progresses so slowly that I have to wait halfway into the book for something interesting to happen. The first half presents no conflicts and instead *talks* about conflicts that may or may not arise in the future. For example, Shonto is a great, respected general whom the Emperor considers a threat to the throne and is therefore sent to a dangerous border province to defend it from barbarians. And so Shonto *discusses* the possible traps there or during the journey there with his advisors, and we only see any action about these traps once he comes across them very much later in the book.

Secondly, I just can't bring myself to care about any of the characters. For example, we are told that Nishima is very beautiful and talented, but the story doesn't *show* me this. The description of her music is unappealing (so different from the moving description of Kvothe's music from *The Name of the Wind*, for instance). Shuyun's character also feels flat to me.

Thirdly, the magic. It is quite interesting the first time it's mentioned, this ability to slow time until it stops. But the application of this magic doesn't create much excitement for me. Shuyun's victory in a kickboxing competition is described only briefly, and there's his demonstration of destroying a wooden desk with his bare hand.

Such a pity. I really would like to read an interesting fantasy novel with an Asian setting, but this just isn't it.

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### gradedog says

This is an epic and satisfying high fantasy in an Asian setting. This is my second (possibly third) time reading *The Initiate Brother* and enjoyed the hell out of it. On to the sequel...

By the way, as well as reading, this time around I listened to the audible audiobook on my commute and it should be noted that the reader's attempts to voice various characters can be pretty awful and Asian stereotype sounding. He should have kept to his normal narrative voice which was otherwise fine.

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### Eric Jackson says

For those who liked Scott Brown's *Gentleman Bastard* series or just like courtly intrigue in an Asian setting, read this book. Beware, there is a second book and the first ends on a bit of a cliff so be prepared to read both books.

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### Chris says

A fun, complex world and story written well. High literature? No. Worth reading? Yes.

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## **Metaphorosis says**

reviews.metaphorosis.com

4 stars

The Shonto have always been willing to take second place in the Empire of Wa. But the Emperor of the young Yamaka dynasty is suspicious, and Shonto Motoru is "promoted" to Governor of distant Seh, on the border with barbarian tribes. Obedient, he goes. Wise, he takes precautions. He takes with him his newly appointed Spiritual Advisor, a prodigy of the Botahist order.

I'm not a big fan of political books - those that are all about trading for advantage, calculating relationships, etc. Yet I like this book, which is all about those things. It and its sequel, *Gatherer of Clouds*, are one huge mass of carefully calculated strategy manipulation.

Russell makes it work because despite the background and concept, he shows the politics through a finely focused lens of personal, intimate relationships. Despite the book's title, this book is less about Shuyun, the initiate, than about the Shonto family - about Shonto Motoru and his allies. Despite a large cast, Russell does an excellent job of creating credible, individual characters. There are half a dozen that stand out, and only a few key characters that are never fully realized.

Russell smooths the way by creating a believable, well thought out world for his characters to inhabit. He steers clear of the 'all that is Oriental is magic' trap some Western writers fall into, building his empire on an amalgam of real-world cultures. If the prose seems restrained and under-emotional, that ties in with his world's values.

Note that this isn't really a stand-alone novel. It's effectively the first part of a larger volume cut in half in the days before massive tomes were more common. You can read this book alone with some satisfaction, but you really need to read the sequel to get the full story.

All in all, highly recommended - even if, like me, you get bored by fantasy politics.

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## **Stevie Kincade says**

(Audiobook) After reading "The Goblin Emperor" and the Imperial Radche trilogy I realised that political or court intrigue, whether in space or in steampunk is a subgenre I really love. I asked on Reddit for recommendations on these types of "manners" anti-action "intrigue" books and "The Initiate Brother" was mentioned.

This is court and Imperial intrigue in an unspecified ancient Asian setting. Monks who have some mystical monk juju abilities but mainly concern themselves with controlling the empire through political means.

The action is kept to a minimum as we switch viewpoints between a dozen or more characters. Early on we have a kickboxing tournament. Instead of chapters of action and fight scenes, the fights are summarised in a few paragraphs and then we are off for more intrigue and counter moves.

"The Initiate Brother" is a gifted student who soon surpasses his masters - our protagonist Shu Lin. Lord Shonto is the honourable Governor who practices the out-of-favour religion of Bhudahara and enlists Bhudahaist Monk Shu Lin to be his spiritual adviser. Emperor Akanatsu clings to power and is counselled by his General Joku Kotta. There are a number of other viewpoints from allies to aristocratic ladies in waiting. It's never totally clear whether we are in ancient China or Japan.

Instead of a single admirable character like Breg to lead us into the world of intrigue, Sean Russell has built a world that is large, but not so large it can't be followed in audiobook form. He creates a balanced set of intriguing characters in a strong story, without any single character standing out. Of course Monk's like Shu Lin aren't exactly the biggest talkers anyway. With this large cast of characters there was no single viewpoint I hated. Comparing it to Game of Thrones where I loved some viewpoints but would have to plow through others (Ironborn etc) TIB was very consistent on characterisation.

Whenever I would begin to question a plot point or motivation the character would seemingly have the same thought and reason it out or at least ask the question. This was a sign of a good writer and kept it largely free from the typical plot and motivation quibbles I can have with these sorts of books.

*Does the crane upon the lilly  
Consider why the morning dawns?*

I made that up it's not in the book but that kind of frequent abstract zen poem nonsense was about the only weak point in a strong book. Maybe wondering how people politely converse about relatives and their journey and then immediately fall passionately in love.

This book was not by any means high literature but it was pitched at a good level for me. I had to have my brain switched on and engaged to follow all of the characters and revelations but it wasn't unmanageable to follow. Perhaps it's story is familiar in the end but it is dressed and told so differently I could get carried away into Russell's world.

If you like court intrigue and manners instead of fight scenes and chases then this book has plenty to offer including the different and unique Asian setting.

It ends in the middle of the story but obviously we are meant to go straight into part 2. Hooray for a "Duology" instead of the obligatory trilogy.

Thoughts on narrator Elijah Alexander:

This audiobook performance seems to be fairly controversial with a number of people being "uncomfortable" with the "stereotypical" performance of the Asian accents...

Now I am as critical of bad narration as anyone but.....*are you kidding me?*

Have you ever watched a Chinese or Japanese dubbed movie? These voicings, performed by Asian actors are pretty freaking broad and soap opera-y. Soap Opera level acting is GOOD for an audiobook. The level of difficulty in voicing this book is INSANE. 50 distinct ASIAN voices/accents would be a challenge for any actor. It took over 12 hours before we got a Brother who sounded like the bastard child of Master Yoda and

Kermit the Frog. so 12 hours and 50 voices in we got ONE voicing I would say was bad. Under the circumstances that is pretty great work,

Should the audiobook company have hired an Asian actor? My *guess* is that they thought if they went with a Chinese-English narrator they would make Japanese people think it is a Chinese story and vice versa. So they went with Elijah Alexander a voice actor capable of doing 50 voices of obviously varying quality. The guy was in "Mr and Mrs Smith" so he's not some crap acting hack right?

This was a really hard book to narrate and Alexander did in my view, an above average job to keep the characters as distinct and non-distracting as he did. Some people complained about his voice for the Emperor saying it was a bit "Charlie Chan". I just thought "Mr Mayagi" myself and the tendency to prolong certain words never even bothered me at 1.25x speed. I think Alexander listened to a bunch of Chinese and Japanese dubbed acting in English and made that his model for his performance.

I can't criticise it, I stayed in the story and could tell who was speaking.

A good listen and highly recommended for anyone who loves a good story of intrigue

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## **Rob's says**

I first read this book around 12+ years ago. I tried to find the sequel and couldn't...so I was delighted when I found both available when I looked again recently, and I downloaded both on audiobook.

The criticisms other reviewers have shared is fair, but I don't consider them to be negatives...

The pacing is slow and there's not a lot of action--the focus is on etiquette and people. This is true...but for me, it worked, because Russell builds such a rich, beautiful world and develops characters that leap to life. There isn't much action, but there is a lot of subtle intrigue. For me, this is far better than contrived action, and it works wonderfully in this book.

The book does end very abruptly, and this is probably one of the reasons why the book stuck with me for the past 12+ years (though quality absolutely had more to do with it than wanting to know what happens next). However, there is a sequel, and my suspicion (with no evidence to back me up--merely a suspicion) is that Russell wrote both books as one and was forced to split them up due to the daunting length of the finished product. Because it has a sequel, the abrupt ending doesn't bother me (though having such a hard time finding the sequel absolutely did bother me!).

The audiobook complaints are about the reader's voices, particularly how stereotypical and racist some of the voices are. While I can see this complaint, I disagree--some of the voices he uses are pretty stereotypical, yes, but they worked in my head and I felt like there was enough variety in the voices used that one or two stereotyped voices didn't make me uncomfortable. Overall, I was extremely impressed with this reader, and he made a book that was already leaping off the page come to life even more vividly, which I didn't think would be possible. I usually have a hard time focusing on audiobooks--auditory-only input is tough on my attention span, apparently. But I absolutely loved the performance he gave with this reading. My only real complaint is that his female voices were sometimes a little too falsetto, but that was such a mild issue for me.

The book stands up to the extremely good memories I had from reading it over a decade ago, and I couldn't

be more thrilled that I've had the chance to go through it again, and to finally find out what happens next!

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### **Bill Mead says**

This book is a guilty pleasure for me. I don't think it is an amazing piece of writing, but Russell has a way of creating thoughtful, artistic characters that just pull my chain. His plots have a meandering quality that allows you to see his characters interact and behave in accordance to their principles. And then we get to see what comes of them.

Maybe not for everyone, but I think he has a loyal following of readers.

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### **Kathleen says**

I enjoyed this book, but I didn't stop here, since all major plot threads are open, all big mysteries unanswered. The story is completed 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).

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.

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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 /Moto-ro-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

Sister Morima

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.

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## Dan says

2018 reared: Exceptionally good, even if I skipped a few paragraphs now and then, due to their being rather drawn out.

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## Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

War and plague have recently swept across the kingdom of Wa, leaving a new emperor feeling insecure on his throne. He feels threatened by the ancient houses of Wa, and most especially by the revered Lord Shonto, an intelligent and highly competent man. When the emperor appoints Shonto as governor of the northern province of Seh, Shonto isn't sure if this is an honor, or a trap.

Both men have some excellent allies. Shonto has adopted the lovely and gifted Lady Nishima, the last heir of the former empire, and has recently secured as his spiritual advisor the Botahist monk Shuyun who is recognized by his brothers as the most promising monk in ages. He has also befriended a minor lord from the North who has little influence in that region, but seems to see things more clearly than his elders do. The emperor's staff includes handsome and clever General Jaku Katta, the famous kickboxer, and Jaku's clever young brother.

Of course, all of these allies — Lady Nishima, Shuyun, Jaku Katta — have their own human desires and concerns. For example, Shuyun is worried about the Botahist order — the ancient scrolls are missing, and some of his brother monks have disappeared. When he leaves his monastery, he sees things which make him question some of the teachings of his faith.

As you can tell by the names, Sean Russell's *The Initiate Brother*, first published in 1991, is an Eastern-flavored fantasy similar to Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* and Guy Gavriel Kay's *Under Heaven*. *The Initiate Brother* also reminds me of GGK's work because it's full of fascinating twisty political intrigue and there's a large cast of realistic and appealing characters who we get to know well when we're privy to their internal thoughts. If you're a fan of GGK, you're almost certain to enjoy *The Initiate Brother* (and you probably won't mind the frequent POV shifts).

The occasional use of short Japanese poems and a strategy game similar to the ancient Chinese boardgame Go, add to the world-building and inspire the story. The plot, which is layered with conflict and intrigue, gradually and inexhaustibly rises to a tense climax at the end of the novel. Then it stops. I was sorry that I didn't have the sequel, *Gatherer of Clouds*, on hand to begin immediately, but I will be picking it up soon — it promises plenty of excitement and I look forward to finding out what happens to these interesting people.

I listened to Blackstone Audio's production of *The Initiate Brother*, read by Elijah Alexander. Mostly I enjoyed Mr. Alexander's narration — he has a superb reading voice. However, because the cast of characters was so large, he used a couple of annoying techniques to distinguish minor characters. For example, in this ancient Oriental culture, the merchant Tanaka has a Boston accent and a female nun sounds like a Chicago mobster. More distracting, though, was what happened when Mr. Alexander ran out of voices. Instead of recycling, he gave each new character a peculiar speech tempo which often makes the character seem like he has a speech impediment or, worse, like he is mentally disabled. I doubt that this is what Sean Russell

intended for his emperor. Realizing that such a large cast must be problematic for an audiobook reader, I'm willing to overlook this little quirk — and I'll be happily reading the sequel on audio.

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### **Jeffrey says**

The Initiate Brother and its sequel Gatherer of Clouds have just been re-issued as a duology.

Both of these books are very good fantasies set in a re-imagined Medieval Asian culture complete with shoguns, warriors, monks and religion.

I recommend them highly.

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### **Tom says**

I really enjoyed the Initiate Brother as it was unlike other novels that I have experienced. It deviates from the European fantasy that we're all familiar with, I imagine it as an amalgamation of a Chinese/Japanese culture. I would recommend it to other epic fantasy readers as it fulfills the world building need. Casual fantasy readers may find the world building hard to digest but that's not to discourage others from reading it.

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### **Spirit-Soul-Body ( Kiran ) says**

Yes, it was good read.

definitely not up to Shogun but full of intrigue and enthralling plots.

it has good story-line and my appetite demanded more but I enjoyed it.

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### **Hallie says**

Not going to give this a rating, as my response was so badly affected by the audiobook experience. *Again*. I liked the narrator fine for the most part (including the sample on Audible), but when he read a few characters, especially the Emperor, it was just awful. Kind of old, old Yellow Peril Villain style, which made me more than a bit uncomfortable about the imaginary ancient "Orient" that was this world. The slow and often not enjoyable listening experience also exacerbated a few little irritants that might well have been much less noticeable in a read. The one that I found most annoying was the way the multiple POVs gave us a fairly prolonged slide into victim-of-deception-hood, known to be such by the reader, for the supposedly brilliant Nishima (who has the best, most mellifluous name ever, though I won't even attempt to spell it). There was a reason her father hadn't told her the truth about an important incident, but given his clear-eyed understanding of why he and Nishima had been separated, it didn't work well enough for me.

The fact that I plan to read the "sequel", which requires being willing to forgive the book for not truly being a book, but merely half a book, says quite a lot. That ending... Stupid publishers...

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