

## Synopsis for *Brantwood*

### Overview of novel

JOHN RUSKIN is losing his mind. He is a celebrated art critic, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, and author of many influential books - but his powerful mind teeters on the brink of an abyss. Inspired by literary biographical novels such as *The Master* by Colm Tóibín (about Henry James) and *The Quickening Maze* by Adam Foulds (John Clare and Tennyson), *Brantwood* traces four years in the life of John Ruskin, keeping close to the known facts, but using the techniques of fiction to imagine his thoughts and feelings, his relationships, and gradual descent into madness.

The novel opens in 1875 shortly before the death of the woman he loves, ROSE LA TOUCHE. Receiving news of her death whilst teaching at Oxford, Ruskin flees to Brantwood, his Lake District home, and throws himself into his work: writing multiple books and trying to improve the lives of the Victorian workers. A friend persuades him to attend a séance where a medium insists Rose is trying to make contact with him from beyond the grave. Deeply disturbed by this idea, Ruskin flees to Venice to seek solace in medieval paintings, but comes to believe that Rose really is trying to contact him. He returns to Brantwood, where he experiences a complete mental breakdown, and is cared for by his cousin JOAN SEVERN. As he recovers he learns that he is being sued for libel by flamboyant American painter JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER. Too mentally frail to attend court, Ruskin is defended by his friends, but he loses the case. Baffled by the outcome and worn down by his grief for Rose, he retreats into ever greater seclusion from the world, and he resigns his professorship at Oxford. This is the story of how a great mind can be unravelled by grief, and how a sensitive, kind and compassionate man can fail to find happiness in love.

*Brantwood* uses John's own words, from his published writings, as well as letters and diaries, to suggest his inner life. His ideas about art, architecture, the natural world, beauty, and what makes a life well lived, are interwoven in the narrative, and form a vital aspect of this complex, flawed and ultimately tragic man.

## **Detailed breakdown of *Brantwood***

### **Chapter One**

The novel opens in London in 1875 on a frosty February day. The middle-aged John is at the home of his cousin, Joan Severn, where he stays whenever he needs to be in London. He's busy preparing lectures for his role as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, as well as writing seven books on topics as diverse as Italian architecture, botany, zoology and geology. He has been regularly visiting the love of his life, twenty-seven-year-old Irish beauty Rose La Touche, who is staying at a hotel in order to be treated by London doctors but without success. For the last eleven years they have had an agonised courtship, with John's proposal of marriage ignored and then spurned, despite Rose's insistence that she loves him. Now it is clear that Rose is having a mental breakdown and has stopped eating: she will die soon. He leaves her bedside, knowing he will never see her again.

After this visit attends a dinner party in which he becomes enraged by the complacency of his wealthy acquaintances, who regard poverty as the fault of the poor, and don't think that working men are capable of appreciating art and beauty. There is discussion of some of his failed schemes to help the poor, including a road-sweeping scheme and a cost-price tea shop in Paddington, both of which failed. He devises a new plan, a working men's museum, to give workers free access to art and beauty in the evenings and on Sundays. He tries to discuss this idea with Joan's husband, ARTHUR SEVERN, but Arthur has little interest in anything beyond his own comforts.

John's valet, CRAWLEY, resigns after twenty years' good service, because his wife is ill. John finds him a less demanding role as caretaker at his Drawing School at Oxford, and Joan looks for a new valet.

### **Chapter Two**

John throws himself into his scholarly life, teaching at Oxford and writing his books. He works on a lecture about glaciers to be delivered to the Royal Institution, and that will form part of his book on geology, *Deucalion*. He continues to develop his plan for a working men's museum. He meets up with his 'Hinksey diggers', a small group of devoted

undergraduates who are working on John's project to build a road for the nearby village of Hinksey - to the merriment of the rest of the university.

The following day, John receives a telegram from Rose's mother - Rose is dead. He is devastated, but in his confused state decides to go ahead with a royal visit to his Drawing School at Oxford from PRINCE LEOPOLD. He attempts to bury his grief whilst coping with the visit, but only prolongs the inevitable.

### **Chapter Three**

He flees to Brantwood, his home on Coniston Water, in the Lake District, where he desperately tries to distract himself from his grief and depression by writing seven books at once and inviting visitors to his home, including his old friend the Pre-Raphaelite painter EDWARD BURNE-JONES and his family.

All the pleasure of his Lakeland home is extinguished by the death of Rose - the beauty of the natural world, about which he wrote so eloquently in his famous books, has no power to console him. He is also saddened by his friends' visit, understanding that whilst the Burne-Joneses love each other, Ned (Edward) is unfaithful to his wife GEORGIE and that her heart is broken. He argues with Ned before they depart, and John feels more intellectually and emotionally isolated than ever.

A new valet, a young Dubliner, PETER BAXTER is employed. His Irish brogue reminds him of Rose.

He decides to employ a former student from the Working Men's College, HENRY SWAN, as curator for his working men's museum, to be based in Sheffield. He begins to choose its contents, mostly from his own collection, including prints and paintings, coins, minerals, feathers, shells, and castings of architectural details from Venice.

### **Chapter Four**

He is persuaded by an old but unreliable friend, GEORGIANA COWPER-TEMPLE, to attend a séance at Broadlands, her home in the New Forest. To amuse Georgiana and her daughter he demonstrates the effect of a glacier on a mountainside, with the use of a large white blanchmanges and hot cream. But the glacier is Rose's death, and his mind is the

mountain, steadily being eroded by grief. He is plagued by doubts about the eternal soul and the possibility of life after death.

Although he has been sceptical of mediums all his life, Georgiana convinces him to attend a séance. When a medium tells him that a young woman has a message for him but cannot communicate in words, he desperately wants to believe that Rose is still present in his life. Combined with his intense grief, this incident about shakes his mental stability

His writing becomes increasingly angry and incoherent. He fears for his own sanity and flees back to Brantwood for Christmas, begging his cousin Joan to come and stay with him.

## **Chapter Five**

He spends Christmas at Brantwood with Joan and her family. He wants Joan's attentions all to himself, but she has a new baby and two young children, as well as a demanding husband.

John wants to publish a library of cheap but good quality paperbacks for working men. He invites two of his favourite undergraduates, ALEXANDER WEDDERBURN and WILLIAM COLLINGWOOD, to stay, and they work with him on a new translation of Xenophon. Entering the sitting room one night, John catches Alec doing an impression of him. It's an affectionate impersonation and John laughs it off, but he feels betrayed by the boys.

His depression worsens and he decides he needs to go to Venice, one of his favourite cities. He requests a leave of absence from his teaching at Oxford for the next year and it's granted, to his enormous relief.

## **Chapter Six**

Venice. City of dreams; city of light. It's easy to lose yourself in a place where the water reflects stone and the stones shimmer with light. John stays in a hotel on the Grand Canal and seeks solace in Carpaccio's paintings of St Ursula. He is given a room at the Accademia, where he spends weeks obsessively copying of *The Dream of St Ursula*.

His eccentric behaviour and intense melancholy make his valet Baxter nervous, and he accidentally cuts John's neck whilst shaving. This triggers thoughts of suicide - John's

grandfather committed suicide by slitting his throat. He becomes increasingly despondent, and writes strange and erratic letters to Joan and other friends, to their intense distress.

## **Chapter Seven**

Winter in Venice and the city is wreathed in mist. It creeps round the cobbled streets like an animal; John feels pursued by it. So easy to lose your way, so easy to lose your mind. Or simply take a misstep into a canal. The city is disintegrating, worn away by water and weather, and neglected by the Venetians themselves. He joins a young Italian count's campaign to sensitively restore her buildings, and donates significant sums of money to the cause.

He moves to cheaper rooms, worrying that his money is draining away. His mind begins to play tricks on him. He has intense dreams about Rose and starts to confuse her with the painting of St Ursula. He believes Rose is trying to communicate with him, sending him messages through plants, water and clouds. This gives him a sense of peace, though his friends are far from reassured. He is reconciled to Baxter, who tries to care for John as best he can, though the young Irishman feels out of his depth.

## **Chapter Eight**

John returns to London after almost a year in Venice, and, exhausted, attends an exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery where his friend Ned Burne-Jones is showing work. They mend their friendship though a tension remains. At the exhibition John sees a painting by the American dandy, James McNeill Whistler. Infuriated by what he sees as its lack of finish and exorbitant price tag, he writes that Whistler's work is the equivalent of flinging 'a pot of paint in the public's face'.

He goes home to Brantwood, more broken and fragile than ever. Joan comes up to Brantwood again to look after him but their relations are increasingly strained. Bramble, his old spaniel, dies of old age. He observes the effect of industrial pollution on the countryside, including dark clouds and polluted waterways. Always sensitive to his surroundings and the weather, he enters a deep state of melancholy.

## **Chapter Nine**

He spends new year at Windsor Castle with Prince Leopold, but it does not revive him. Back at Brantwood, just after his fifty-ninth birthday, he has a major mental breakdown, during which time he is delirious, paranoid and violent. It lasts for six weeks. Joan and Arthur move into Brantwood to take care of him, and in his madness he accuses them of plotting to kill him and steal his money. During one night of horror he also mistakes his own beloved cat for the devil and brutally murders Puss.

John begins to recover, but he is devastated to learn of how severe his breakdown has been, and of the terrible things he said and did whilst out of his mind. He spends time in the garden as he tries to mend himself.

## **Chapter Ten**

The perimeters of John's life are narrowing, and he hunkers down at Brantwood, receiving few visitors and employing a secretary to deal with his correspondence. But it is not as easy for him to retreat as he thought: he discovers that flamboyant American painter James McNeill Whistler is suing him for libel over his 'pot of paint' comment.

Too mentally fragile to attend the trial, John is defended by his friends, including Edward Burne-Jones, but he loses the case. Baffled by the libel trial outcome and worn down by his grief and his frustrations with the modern world, he resigns his post as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, and retreats more deeply into his private grief and loneliness.