



ESCAPE *from* POMPEII

written and illustrated by
Christina Balit

Focus Questions

How was Pompeii destroyed?
How was the splendor and
beauty of Pompeii recovered?


On a hillside overlooking the sparkling Bay of Naples, the Roman city of Pompeii glimmered in the sunlight.

From his window, young Tranio listened to the noise humming from bars, taverns, and shops around him, and to the busy tradesmen haggling in the streets below. Beyond the massive city walls he could see Pompeii's greatest protector looming in the distance. They called it Vesuvius, the Gentle Mountain.

Could anyplace feel safer than here, Tranio wondered? Was anything more beautiful?

Tranio was the son of Dion the actor and lived with his parents near the Theater District of Pompeii. He'd often sneak to the harbor at the mouth of the River Sarnus and hide behind sacks of grain. There he'd watch pots of wine, oil, and spices being carried to and from the ships, or fishermen unloading their rich catches.





Sometimes Tranio went to the forum to listen to the politicians make their speeches, the shopkeepers argue, and the poets sing.

His favorite song was:

Rumble down, tumble down,
great city walls,
Feel the ground grumble,
the citizens stumble
When the earth shakes, and
rumble down, tumble down.

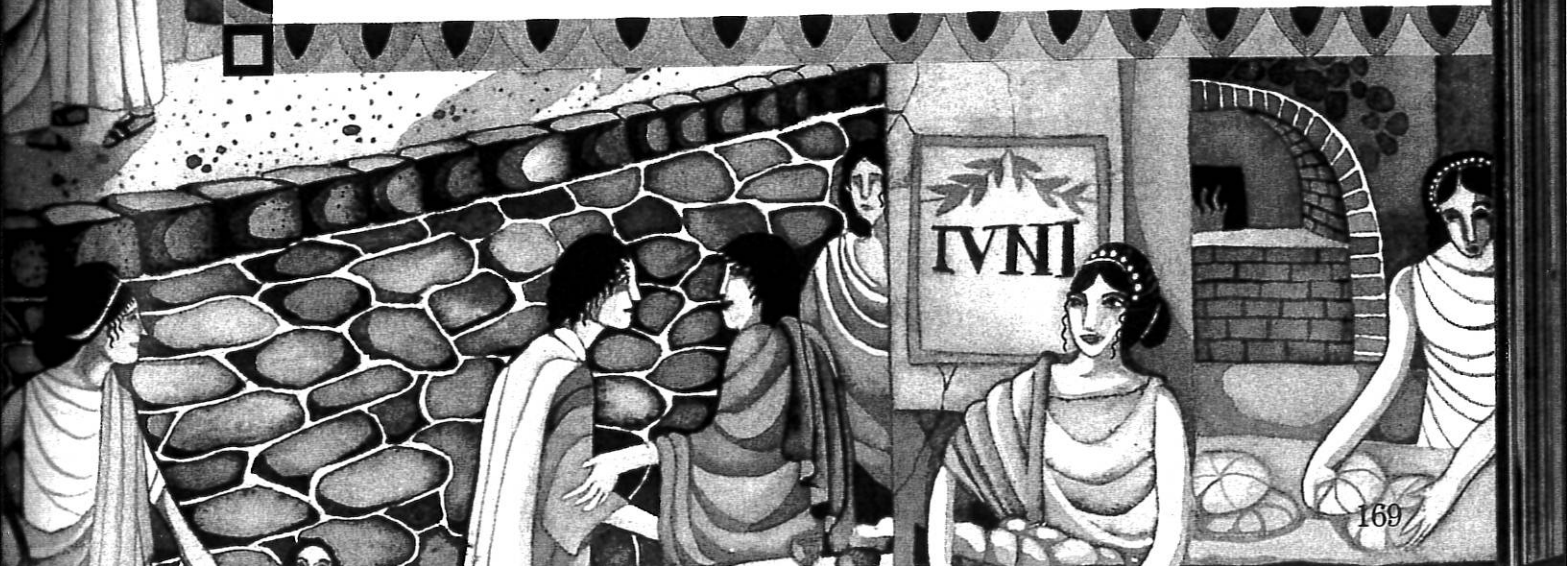
Everyone would join in, laughing as they remembered the earthquake tremors. A few years before Tranio was born, there had been a big earthquake in Pompeii, and parts of the town had still not been fully repaired. But nobody took tremors seriously anymore.

On other days, Tranio would shout up to Livia, the baker's daughter, who lived across the street, "Liv! Stop curling your hair and come and play jacks! I've got a bag of bones from my mother's kitchen! They're just the right size!"

Livia spent most of her time learning to weave and cook, but during the hot afternoons she and Tranio would sit by the fountain and play knucklebones, or chase dogs down the street.

One hot August day, Dion took Tranio through a shady passage into one of Pompeii's two theaters on the edge of the city, where a pantomime was being rehearsed.

"Sit on the steps, son, and learn!" said Dion. "We'll be using you in small parts soon."



To begin with, Tranio enjoyed watching the sword fights and strutting clowns. The masked actors playing thieves and devils and the leaping acrobats quite took his breath away. But eventually his attention began to wander. . . .

Then something happened. . . . The stone steps creaked, the boards began to rattle, and the building quivered. Props fell to the stage and scenery split. Tranio's father froze to the spot. Everyone was silent.

But one by one the actors began to relax. "Rumble down, tumble down, here we go again!" they chanted.

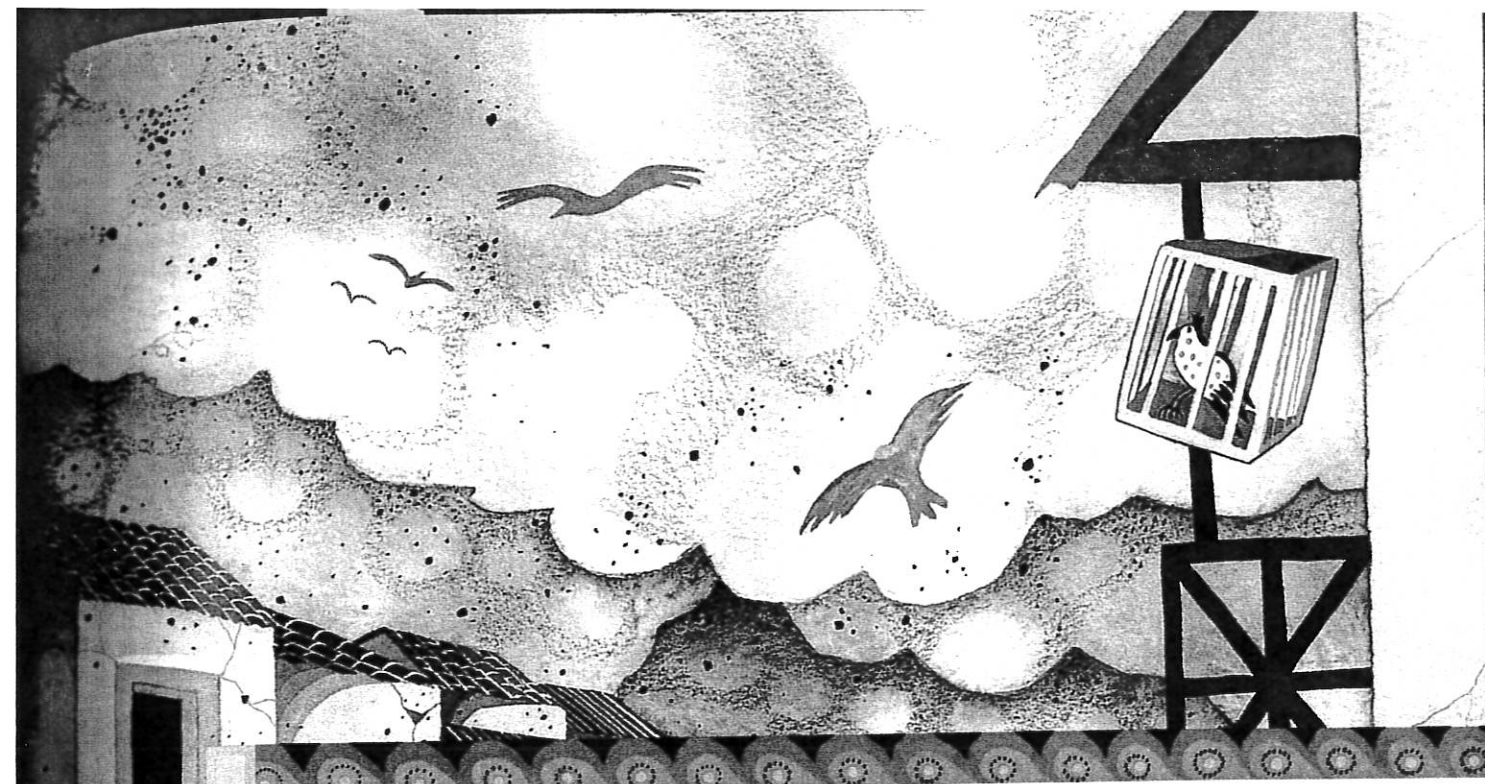
"Nothing to fear, everybody!" called Tranio's father. "Back to rehearsal, please." The actors fastened their masks and carried on as if nothing had happened.

But Tranio wriggled through the curtain and ran down the street.

He ran as fast as he could to Livia's house. Everyone was shouting, arguing, carrying belongings outside to safety.

"Livia!" he called. "Liv, where are you?" The bakery was empty. Loaves lay scattered on the floor, the oven blazed, and the small donkey turning the grain mill brayed and jumped nervously against its chain.





"Tranio!" Livia leapt down the stairs. "Father's chasing our goat through the market! The poor old thing bolted when the ground began to grumble. You'd have died laughing. Come on!"

Flushed and excited, the two children ran hand in hand into the dusty streets.

But as they ran, the sky began to darken and a thick cloud drifted slowly overhead.

Livia turned to Tranio. "Why are the seagulls flying toward the woods? They're going the wrong way."

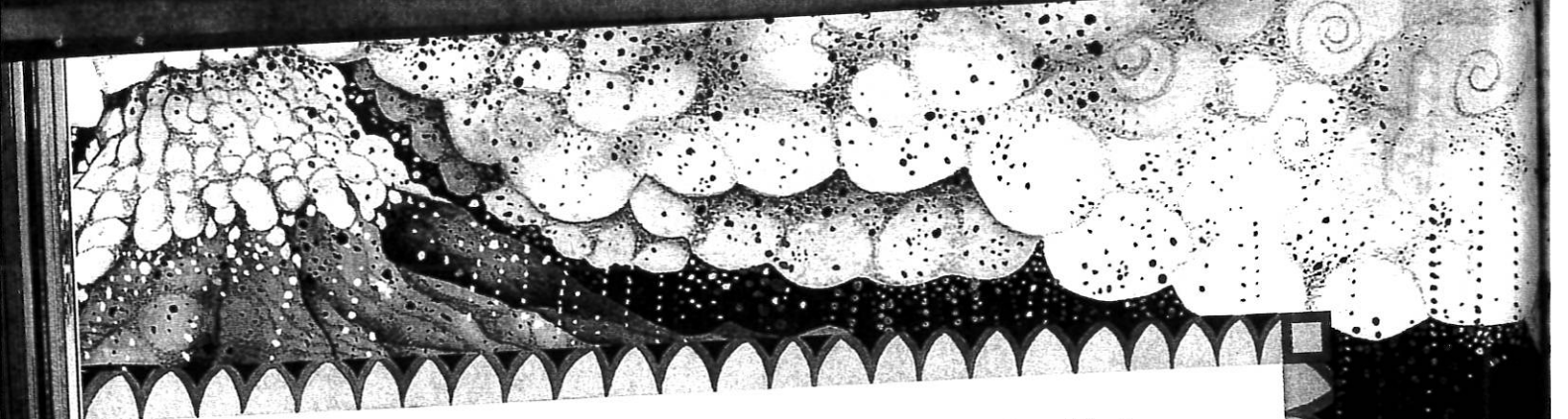
A small bird in a hanging cage chirped frantically, trapped behind its bars as the air began to fill with ash.

Livia coughed. "Tranio . . . perhaps we should go back."

Tranio grabbed her hand. "We can't go back. The dust is too thick. Quick—the harbor! Run! Just run!"

Boats were bobbing on the choppy water as men began to untie lines from their moorings. No one noticed two small children climb up the narrow plank of a small Greek cargo ship and hide beneath a pile of colored rugs. Dusty and tired in their hiding place, they soon fell asleep.

But as they slept, the anxious captain untied his boat. He sensed that the winds had changed direction and that the air was uncomfortably hot. The sea began to churn and pull back from the shore.



When Tranio and Livia woke and looked out, they were horrified. Pompeii was getting farther and farther away. The sky was now thick with pumice and black with ash.

"Tranio, I can't breathe . . . in the back of my throat. . . ." As she spoke, Livia started to choke. The children could hear dogs barking and people's muffled screams as they ran gasping for air with rags covering their mouths or pillows over their heads. Some people fell to the grumbling, trembling ground.

And then, in one terrible endless moment, they heard mighty Mount Vesuvius roar. Its top exploded in a scream, and flames ripped upward to the sky. A massive cloud of silver ash rose to the heavens, twisting and bubbling in all directions, until everything was in total darkness.

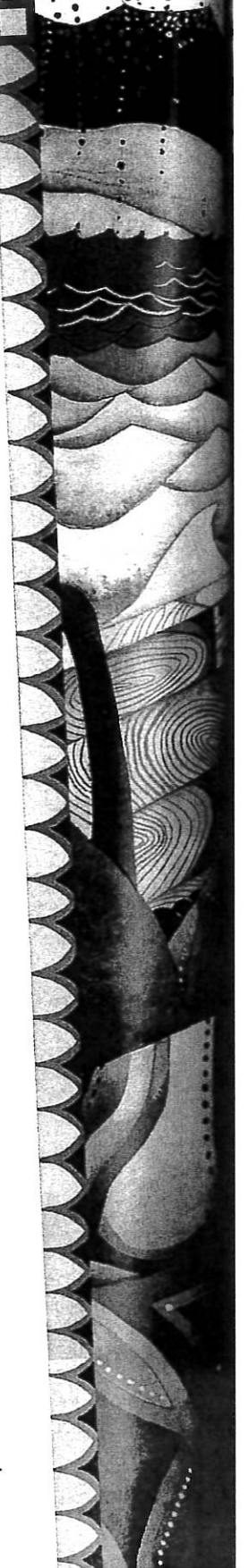
Lightning flashed and thunder roared. Streams of molten liquid flowed in fast rivers down the mountain slopes and covered a nearby town. The walls, streets, and gardens of their beloved Pompeii disappeared beneath a blanket of ash and stones. Before their very eyes, everything and everyone they had ever loved were destroyed.

Tranio and Livia held each other desperately when the steaming lava reached the sea itself. The water began to swell against the sides of the boat as it moved slowly out to safety.

They had left just in time. Soon the sea sank back from the shore and even the fish were stranded there.

Many years passed . . . and the mountain grew cool and still. At first its slopes were burnt and barren, but in time plants began to grow as the volcanic soil brought forth its riches once more. Most people had forgotten the buried city.

An old man and woman stood in the shade of an orange tree and laid flowers there. Long ago, they had been rescued by the kind captain of a Greek cargo ship, and he had raised them as his own. They were Tranio and Livia, saying farewell to those buried under the ash beneath their feet.



"We won't forget you," they whispered.

Would anyone ever find their beloved Pompeii? they wondered. Would anyone ever see its splendid streets? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Tranio and Livia walked back to their small house beside the orange grove. For the rest of their days they would carry a deep sorrow within their hearts.

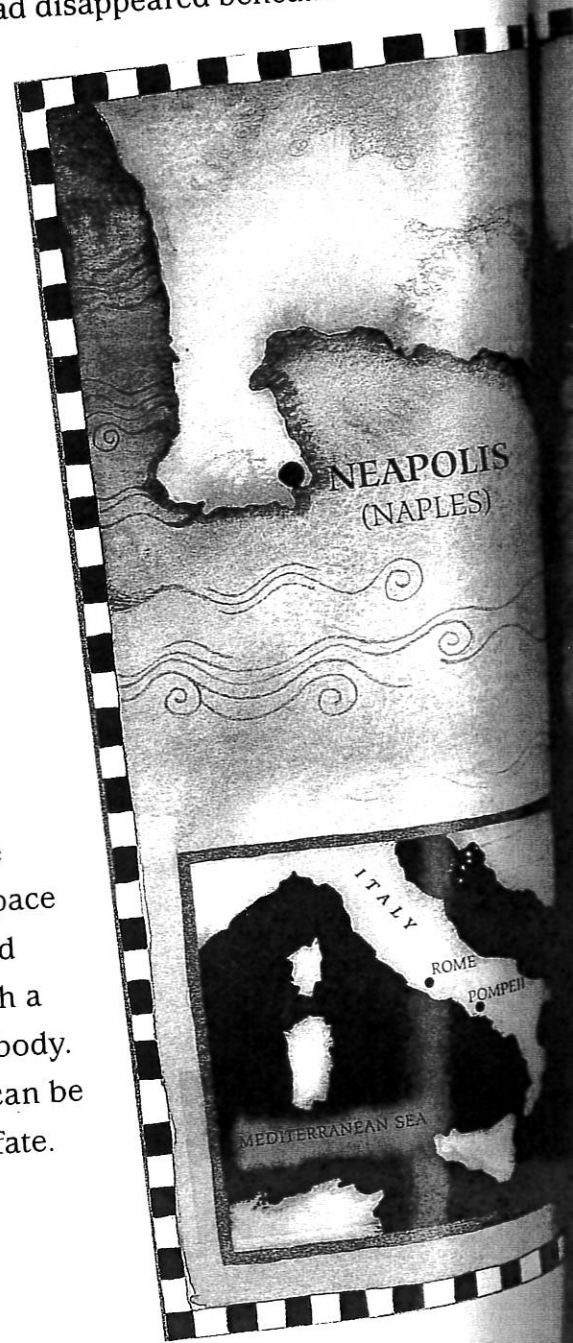


THE STORY OF POMPEII

Before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii was a busy, beautiful Roman city where about 15,000 people lived. In those days, during the ancient Roman Empire, Vesuvius appeared green and peaceful, but on August 24 in A.D. 79, a great mushroom-shaped cloud rose from its top and, to everyone's surprise, the volcano began to erupt. In nearby Pompeii, day became as dark as night. Showers of ash and stone fell, covering streets and houses. Within a few hours rooftops started to collapse, and many people fled. The next morning, clouds of poisonous gases and ash poured down from the volcano, suffocating those who had stayed behind.

When the dust had settled, Pompeii and its lovely surroundings, including the neighboring city of Herculaneum, had disappeared beneath a blanket of ash, pumice, and lava. The city had become like Sleeping Beauty's castle. Trees and plants grew over it. As time passed, people remembered the city of Pompeii, but they forgot exactly where it had been. Pompeii slept for nearly 1,700 years, until, in 1748, excavators began to find its remains. Temples, theaters, baths, shops, and beautifully painted houses were uncovered, along with skeletons of the victims, sometimes in family groups. Soon Pompeii became famous, and people came from far and wide to see it. They were amazed at what they saw.

In 1863 the archeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli decided to try an experiment. He noticed that where a body had lain in the ash, it had left hollows in the shape of the body that had once been there. He poured plaster into one body space and waited for it to set. When the ashes around it were removed, he found that he was left with a plaster cast in the exact shape of the victim's body. Since then, many casts have been made and can be seen in Pompeii—sad reminders of the city's fate.



Vesuvius has not erupted since March 1944, but the volcano is not dead—only sleeping. Like all volcanoes, it has given the land around it rich soil that is easy to farm. As in Roman times, the people of modern-day Italy have built their homes there, and towns and villages crowd the shores of the Bay of Naples. One day Vesuvius will erupt again, but now, with modern scientific instruments checking the volcano each day, it is hoped that no more lives will be lost.

Pompeii is not yet fully excavated, but its uncovered remains help us see what a Roman city really looked like and how the Romans lived, worked, and played.



Meet the Author and Illustrator

Christina Balit

Balit has lived in many parts of the world. These experiences have deeply affected her writing and illustrations. As a child she grew up in parts of the Middle East. Balit has also lived in Greece and in England, which is her current home. She studied at Questers Theatre School, the Chelsea Art College, and the Royal College of Art before becoming an illustrator. Now, through her books, she brings to life legends and history from the areas of the world she has called home.





READING: COMPREHENSION AND ANALYSIS 2.3 Connect and clarify main ideas by identifying their relationships to other sources and related topics.

Theme Connections

Discuss

Within the Selection

1. Which events in "Escape from Pompeii" really happened?
2. What did people learn about ancient Rome from the archaeologists who dug up Pompeii?

Across Selections

3. Compare the history of the ancient cities in "The Island of Bulls" and "Escape from Pompeii." What happened in both selections?
4. In "The Island of Bulls" and "Escape from Pompeii," how did archaeologists contribute to our knowledge of ancient civilizations?

Beyond the Selection

5. How does "Escape from Pompeii" add to what you know about ancient civilizations?
6. Compare the fictional and nonfictional accounts found in "Escape from Pompeii." Which do you prefer? Why?

Write

Write a dialogue in which you discuss with a family member the positives and negatives of starting a farm community near Mount Vesuvius.

Read

To learn more about Roman ruins and other ancient cities, look for books and magazine articles about Roman ruins and other ancient cities to read on your own.

