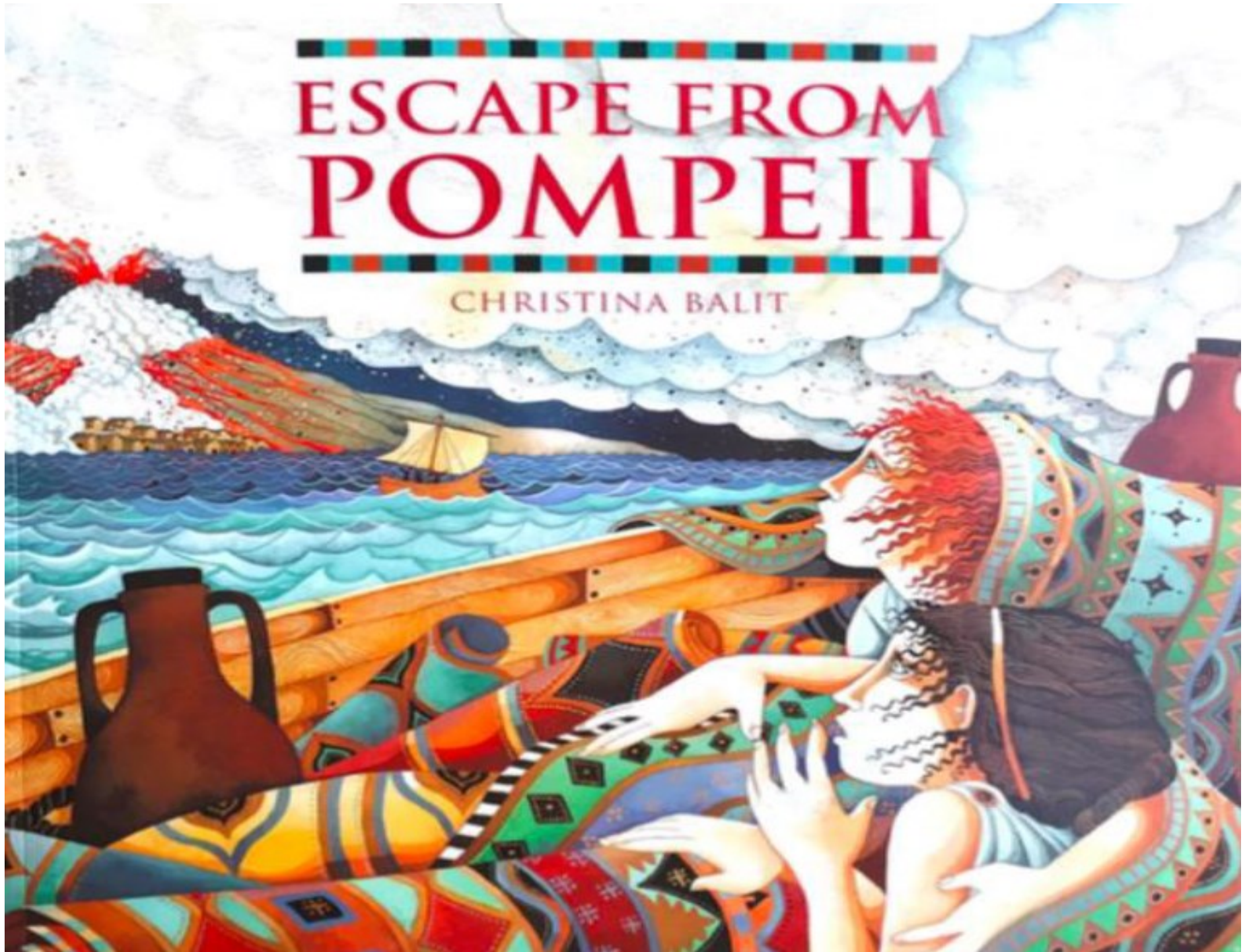


ESCAPE FROM POMPEII

CHRISTINA BALIT



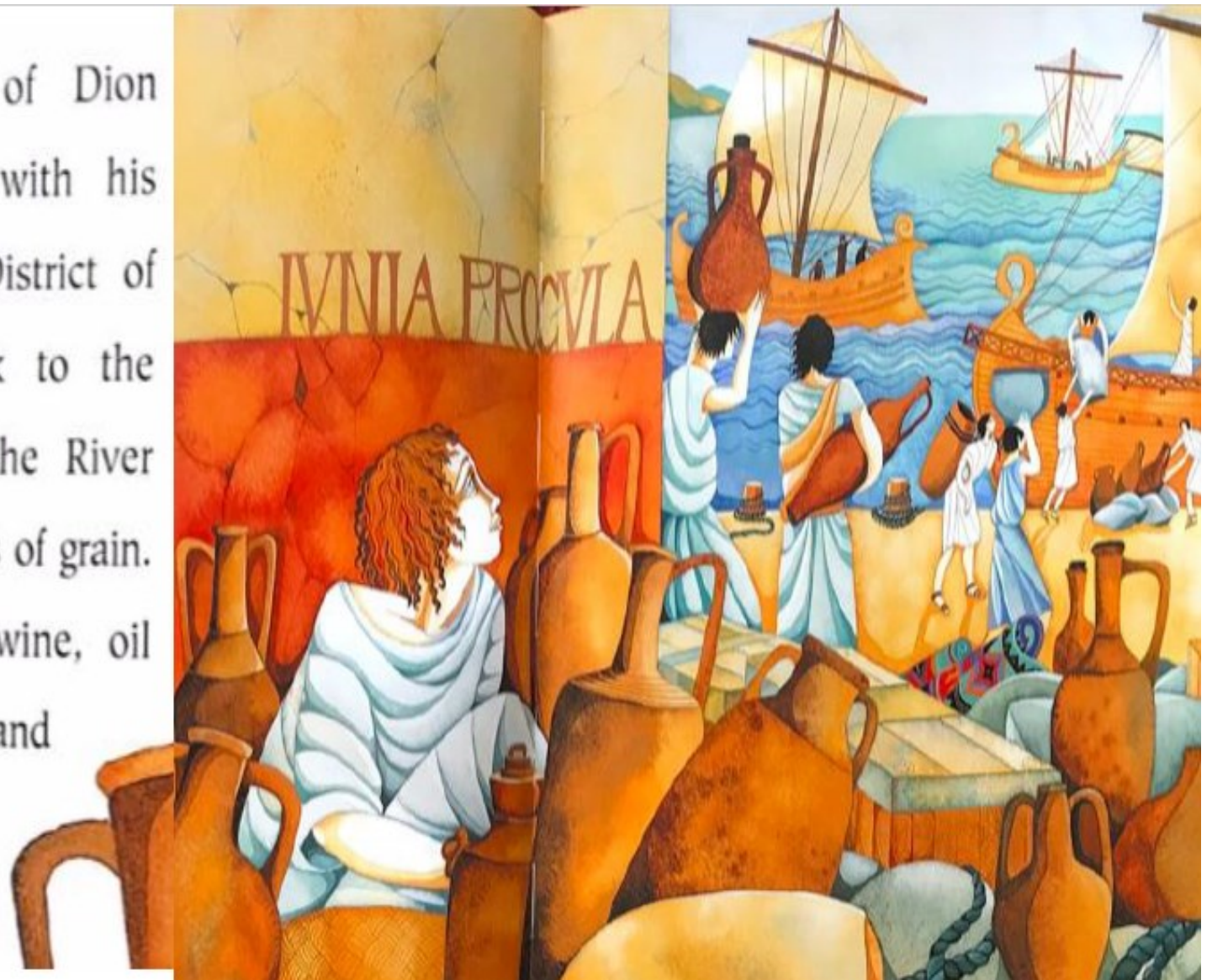


On a hillside overlooking the sparkling bay of Naples, the Roman city of Pompeii glimmered in the sunlight.

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 anyone 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 Theatre District of Pompeii. He'd often sneak to the harbour 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 watch the politicians make their speeches, the stall-holders argue, and listen to the poets sing.

His favourite song was:

“Rumble down, tumble down,
great city walls,

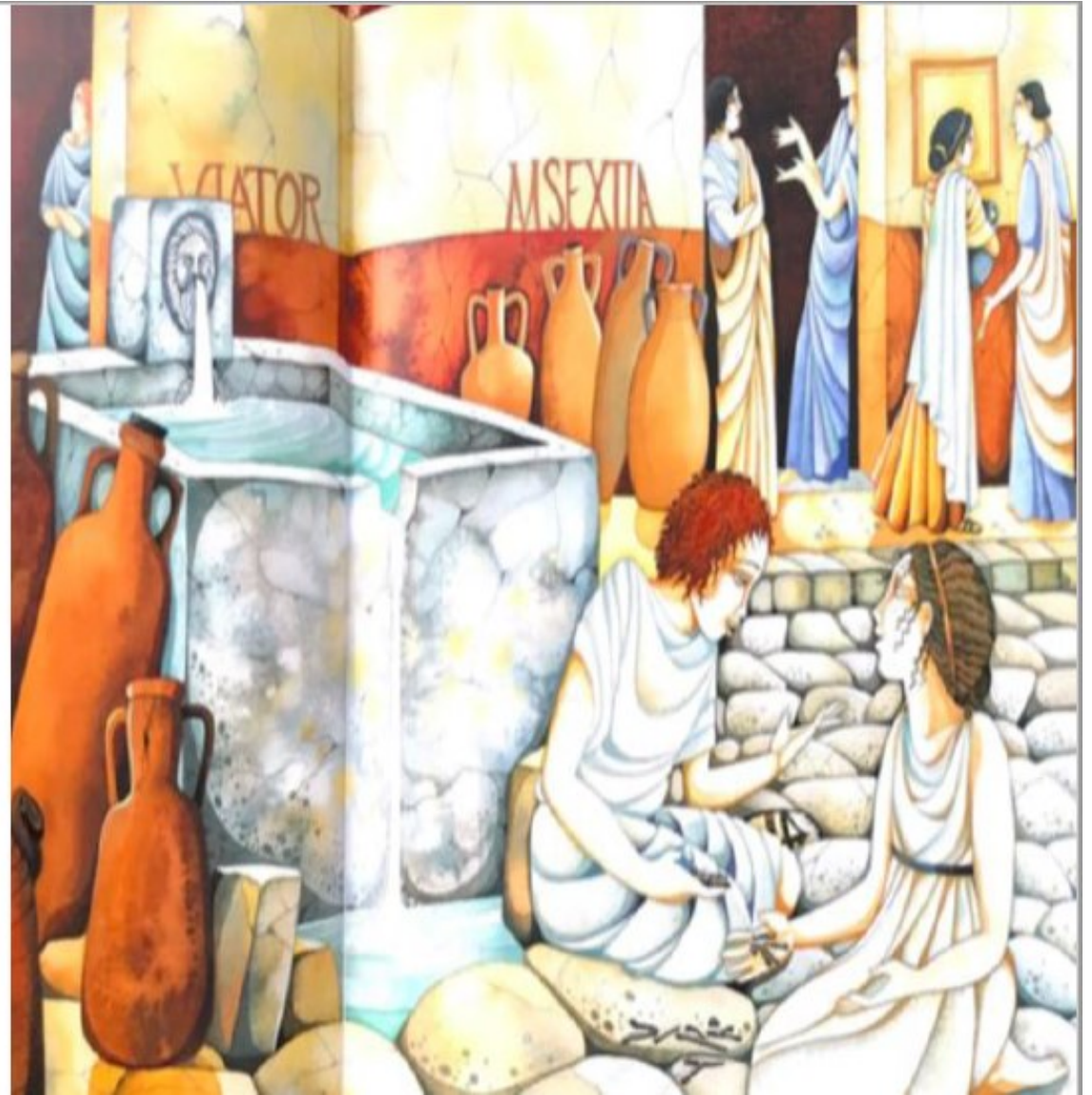
Feel the ground grumble,
the citizens stumble

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 yet been fully repaired. But nobody took tremors seriously any more.

On other mornings, 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 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 squat by the fountain playing knucklebones, or chase dogs down the street.





One hot August day, Dion took Tranio through a shady passage into one of Pompeii's two theatres 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 ...