

Teresa - this is the unexpurgated version which you should share with the family, if you feel they'd like to see it.

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BY: HARRIS;08/16,12:09 OP: RISEVE;01/20,15:36 FR: RISEVE-MET;12/13,17:10
NOTE: cul-advobit-di-Donato-severo-- PRINTED: 11:51 21-JAN-92

P.S. Pietro would not be surprised at the insensitive editing of something of importance to Italians.

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~~{advance-obit-on-Pietro-di-Donato-written-by-Richard-Severe-June-17-1991-
HOLD FOR SEVERO~~

Pietro di Donato, the bricklayer/author whose "Christ in Concrete" was acclaimed as an American classic when it was published in 1938, died TK at TK. He was TK years old and lived for many years in Setauket, L.I. ~~{Editor:-Pietro di-Donato-was-born-April-3-1911}~~

His novel was hailed by critics here and abroad as a metaphor for the immigrant experience in America, not just that of Italians but of all those who came from Europe and suffered the vicissitudes of a hard-bitten workaday existence in early 20th Century America.

For Mr. di Donato personally, the book was not so much a metaphor but the straightforward recounting of the life and times of his father, Geremio, a bricklayer who was killed in 1923 when a building collapsed, burying him in concrete. Geremio's passing, and the death a few years later of his wife, Annuziata Cinquina di Donato, meant that the burden of raising himself and seven other children fell to Pietro as a boy of 12. The di Donato family had emigrated in penury from Vasto, in the Abruzzi region of Italy, to West Hoboken, N.J., which is where Pietro had been born on April 3, 1911. It had no material resources to fall back on.

Mr. di Donato's extraordinary power as a story teller was apparent in the first chapter as he described the last few moments of Geremio's life, as the father he loved was buried under the concrete:

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"He pushed the bone-bare jaw maniacally; it splintered, cracked, and a jagged fleshless edge cut through the form, opening a small hole to air. With a desperate burst the lung-primed air blew an opening through the shredded mouth and whistled back greedily a gasp of fresh air. He tried to breath but it was impossible. The heavy concrete was settling immutably and its rich cement-laden grout ran into his pierced face. His lungs would not expand and were crushing in tighter and tighter under the settling concrete...His bones cracked mutely and his sanity went sailing distorted in the limbo of the subconscious. With the throbbing tones of an organ in the hollow background, the fighting brain disintegrated and the memories of a baffled lifetime sought outlet."

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The book was published a decade after deaths of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in Massachusetts, who were executed after a murder trial that became a nation's shame. The resonances of discrimination in the Sacco-Vanzetti case and the conditions that led to the death of the elder di Donato were not lost on book readers in America. And Pietro di Donato's power as a story-teller moved even the critics.

"Christ in Concrete," which had appeared initially as a short story in Esquire magazine, became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in its novel form and remained on best seller lists for months.

Charles Poore, writing in The New York Times on Sept. 15, 1939, said that Mr. di Donato was, if anything, "overladen with the art of the novel. He can write, at will, like Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, May Sinclair, Joyce, or any of the experimentalists who have heard the siren song of Stein." He called the book "eloquent" and "Italian to the core...by turns operatic, lyrical, ferocious and hilarious" and of Mr. di Donato's art, Mr. Poore predicted, "no one will ever doze over his pages."

When asked on one occasion where and how he had learned to write such prose, Mr. di Donato said that during a strike in the building trades, he had wandered into a library and discovered French and Russian novelists. He was especially fond of Emile Zola. He recalled thinking, "This is where I belong. I can do this, too."

Mr. di Donato received an abundance of reviews as praiseworthy as the one written by Mr. Poore and in their totality, they might have launched almost any author toward a lifetime of fulfillment in belles lettres. But it did not work that way for Mr. di Donato. His literary output was modest, not extravagant, and judging from the reviews of such books as his "Life of Mother Carbini" (1960), "Three Circles of Life" (1960) "The Penitent," (1962), and "Naked Author," (1970) the critics felt he never again achieved the heights he had reached with "Christ in Concrete."

Indeed, in the years immediately following publication of "Christ in Concrete" he did not write at all. Asked in 1949 why he had not produced a book in nearly 10 years, he replied that he had been "too busy living" and that the main thing was "to live, not to write."

His gifts as a writer continued to receive recognition, however, as happened in 1978, when he received a prize from the Overseas Press Club for a piece of non-fiction on Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro.

When he wasn't writing, he continued working as a bricklayer. Among the buildings that he help construct were those for the 1939-'40 World's Fair in Flushing Meadow. He did take time out to dramatize "Christ in Concrete" and told one interviewer that if it were ever produced, he wanted to act in it. But nothing came of his wish.

When World War II began, he registered himself as a conscientious objector and was sent to a camp in Cooperstown, N.Y., where he worked as a forester and did some writing. He married the former Helen Dean in 1943 and the ceremony was performed by Fiorello La Guardia.

After the war, "Christ in Concrete" was made into a movie in Britain, starring Sam Wanamker as Geremio and Lea Padovani was Annunziata. Entitled "Give Us This Day," it was not released in the United States, although it won the Masterpiece Award in 1949 at the Venice Film Festival. The screenplay was by Ben Barzman.

Throughout his life, Mr. di Donato consistently related strongly to the working poor and befriended those he saw as supportive of workers. Among those he knew and admired were Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as well as Pope John XXIII. He lamented what he saw as Italian-Americans becoming materially successful but turning their backs on the dignity of the original immigrants from Italy.

In an interview with The New York Times in 1970, he said he thought that

Italian-Americans were no longer self-entertaining and self-regulated, as their forebears had been.

"The species has degenerated," he said. "The Italian-American has become a vociferous, rotund breed, endomorphs in the anarchy of freedom over freedom. A good people gone wrong."

As critical as he was of his people, he thought they had a legitimate grievance because of books and articles linking them with what the Justice Department called "organized crime" or the "mafia." He said that he thought it represented "collusion among predators" - reporters and police and he was especially condemning of Italian-American writers who had capitalized on their surnames to produce novels and works of non-fiction dealing with the mafia theme. These, he said, served to pander to those who stereotyped Italians.

He also disliked writers who, once liberal, had become more conservative.

"They never broke stone," he said. "They all have women's fingers."

In addition to his other activities, Mr. di Donato maintained an interest in the affairs of his community. In 1951, for example, he wrote a pageant about the founding of Setauket for the dedication of a school.

Mr. di Donato's wife predeceased him. His children were Peter and Richard.

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