

UNFORGETTABLE POWER: A REMEMBRANCE

By Leslie Hanscom

TO THE UNORGANIZED club of people who have made their own discovery of "Christ in Concrete" as an American classic, the report of the author's death is ambiguous news. As an artist in active practice, Pietro di Donato had been dead for many years. He wrote one novel in an elemental outbreak of talent and then went into a paralysis of self-doubt. He once made a remark to this writer so dismissive of his own worth that I remember it with amazement.

"If I could write like you," di Donato said, "I could have made something of myself." To this flustered

admirer, it was as though the Pope had said, "If I had your sanctity, I could be comfortable in my job." Fairly late in life, I had just read for the first time the one piece of writing for which his name is known, and I had gone to interview him in a state not fully recovered. I had tried reading the book while commuting on the Long Island Rail Road and found that it couldn't be done. The reason was that I was crying so much that I was making a spectacle of myself. I had to leave off and read the book in privacy.

In the oddly and awkwardly written pages of "Christ in Concrete," Pietro di Donato managed to pour all of the volcanic emotion which the Italian people bring to love of family and to engagement with life. It is not a book to be admired for literary finesse.

The author had no acquired craft with which to work, and that was what he meant in paying what sounds like a compliment to a journeyman carpenter of sentences and paragraphs. But he created a novel which exists on its own terms as an overwhelming communication of some of life's most heart-touching truths.

It is the story of an Italian family made desperate when the father, a construction laborer, dies in an accident that buries him in wet concrete. The time is the 1920s, when this country had no social welfare and no effective child labor laws. The family survives only because the oldest boy, Paulie, who is no more than 12, takes up his father's tools and goes to work as a bricklayer to support his mother and her seven other children. With his aching child's body, he must

try to keep pace with grown men.

In the 20 or so years since I read the novel, I have read and forgotten innumerable others, but forever stamped in my memory is the image of the heroic man-boy, trying to get the rest that will strengthen him for another day, while lying in bed with younger siblings who wet him in their sleep. The reader who is gripped by the truth of the inexpert writing knows without question that this can't be fiction, and it isn't. Paulie is the author, who was still a bricklayer in his 20s when he wrote this record of his own life.

His life was strange in childhood, and it remained so. When "Christ in Concrete" was published in 1939, it beat its only competitor at the time to become a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The loser was another classic, Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." But though Steinbeck went on to win the Nobel Prize, di Donato never again wrote anything of note. His book made him briefly wealthy and fam-

ous. The columnist Dorothy Kilgallen named him as one of the 10 handsomest men in America. He had a good time. "I squandered most of the money," he told me. "I never was any good at handling it, and I was over-generous. The time came when I was back at the bricks and back on the booze."

During World War II, he was imprisoned in a conscientious objector's camp, where he met the woman he married. Thereafter, he dropped permanently out of the limelight. He spent his life in the building business on Long Island. When I met him almost 20 years ago, he had just mortgaged the modest, attractive house he built for himself in Setauket to raise bail for a son who had landed in a youthful scrape over narcotics possession. He was cooking the boy's lunch and defending his innocence of the charge. "That magnificent boy," he said in the son's presence, "can you imagine? What could I do. I love him." He was still Paulie, fighting for the family.

Over the years, some editor would rediscover "Christ in Concrete" and, under the influence of its extraordinary power, try to draw him back into authorship. He published a few magazine articles and two or three books, one of them a life of Mother Cabrini. The books were published in paperback and attracted little attention. When his name turned up, it was usually in the Where Are They Now form of reference.

I never met him after that interview, but I was always aware that living on Long Island was the author of "Christ in Concrete," and that the one who created it had to have in him some part of a great man. Of any man who can so stir the heart in one novel, I don't think it can accurately be said that he died on Sunday. / ■

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