

# Once Upon a Time He Created a Classic

By Joseph Barbato  
FROM SETAUKET, N.Y.

**T**HE WOOD crackles in the fireplace as Pietro di Donato, 65, bricklayer, sits in the living room of his modest Long Island home and recalls that extraordinary moment in his youth when he created a literary classic.

"I was 25 and I was finally on relief," he says. "This was in 1937. God, relief was a godsend to me. I was supporting my seven brothers and sisters in Northport, not far from here. There was a building strike, and for the first time in my life I was free and didn't have to work. The Government was paying our rent. We dug clams and filched corn and vegetables from the farmers.

"I started to read and I devoured a book a day in the library. It had treasures: Balzac, de Maupassant, Flaubert, Zola, Pushkin, Dostoevski. I was in heaven! I discovered reading at the age of 25."

One day, at a friend's urging, he read Clifford Odets' play *Awake and Sing*.

"Instinctively, I reacted negatively," says di Donato. "I was contemptuous of the plight and whining of Odets' characters. I told my friend, 'You call him a genius? I'm not a writer, but I could do better if I simply told you, on paper, about my father, who loved life, and who only wanted to live and work for his family and was deprived of that. I'll call it *Christ in Concrete*.'"

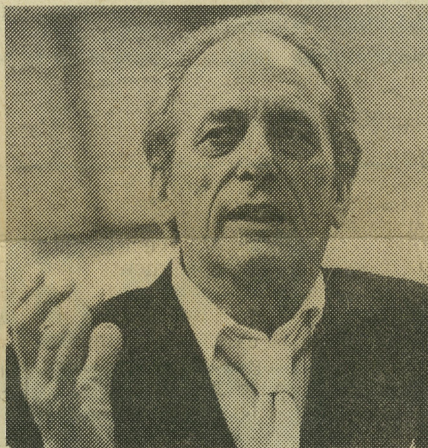
With only an eighth-grade education, di Donato then wrote how his

father, a bricklayer, was killed—buried under a ton of concrete—when a building he was working on collapsed on Good Friday, 1923. In the story, Paul, 12, the oldest of eight children, then goes to work himself as a bricklayer to support his mother and brothers and sisters. Paul, of course, is actually Pietro, for *Christ in Concrete* is a completely autobiographical work.

Di Donato sent his 30-page manuscript to Esquire, where editor Arnold Gingrich immediately accepted it, declaring the young author an important literary discovery. Besieged with requests from publishers to turn his story into a book, di Donato let his original story stand as the first chapter in what became *Christ in Concrete*. "I simply continued the truth about my family as it happened, and I had a book," he says.

Published in 1939 to overwhelming critical acclaim, the novel was a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and was sold to the movies. Di Donato was pronounced "a stunning writer" (New York Times), his book "an all-absorbing experience" (Los Angeles Times) and a "magnificent masterpiece" (Newsday). Overnight the young bricklayer from West Hoboken, N.J., became the toast of the literary town. He attained such fame that when he married some years later, the ceremony was performed by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in New York's City Hall.

Di Donato's book, long out of print and now reissued by the original publisher, has held up remarkably well. It



—New York Daily News

Pietro di Donato: 'These things you don't invent.'

remains a powerful, convincing, and highly lyrical rendering of life among the tenement-dwelling Italian-American immigrants—and, by extension, of all urban working-class families of the early 1900s. Above all there is the rich language of the book, which, while crudely written, is astonishingly poetic.

Occasionally the author gets up and places another log in the fireplace, which, like the house itself, he built with his own hands. Long gray hairs curl over the back of his open shirt collar. He is a vigorous, strongly built man who looks far younger than his years.

"I had no education that would in-

terfere with the process of making you understand Italian," he says. "There were no synthetic barriers to make me have the characters speak proper English. I was simply recording the language and the ways and the drama of my people and the tragedy of my family.

"My mother saw me coming home from the job at the age of 12 with cement on my shoes. I weighed 72 pounds. As I came up the stairway that night, she looked at me and said in Italian, 'Good Friday, the 30th of March.' My father was killed on Good Friday, do you see what I mean? Where's the equivalent of that? In what opera? Maybe in Sophocles. These things you don't invent. These things you cannot contrive."

After the enormous success of his book, di Donato began spending his new-found money lavishly. "The question is, after a person becomes a writer that way, what does he do? I got a taste of honey, and I despised myself. I'm an idealist, that's all there is to it. But I became an experimenter and a sensualist. Maybe it was easier to be in the constraint that made me a saint than in the wilderness of freedom."

A pacifist, he spent World War II in a camp for conscientious objectors in Cooperstown, N.Y. Then he moved to Long Island, began raising a family, and, finding himself unable to write, went back into construction work. Ten years later, he began writing the articles and short stories that continue to appear regularly in *Playboy* and other magazines.

Recently, as he turned 65, di Donato considered retiring to his parents' village in Abruzzi, then decided against it. Inspired by Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, he now plans to cross the United States by bus to find out what the common people are thinking; to learn, as he puts it, "what values are left."

"*Democratic Vistas* contains some of the greatest prose I've ever read. Like the poet, I have always felt that the strength of our nation is in the people. In the sense that they produce, they break their backs, they sweat, they put up the buildings, they dig the coal, they die in accidents, they fight the wars, and they pay for all the charlatans and prostitutes — all the evil people."

If he could, he'd walk across the country. Failing that, he says, "the only way to do it is in the hominess of a bus that goes from stop to stop, from village to village. I want to meet the poor, the working people, the masses. I'm not interested in the middle classes or the rich. They take care of themselves; they have their sinecures. What they have to say doesn't matter, because they are not the producers."

And how about *Christ in Concrete*? How does it relate to the country he'll see from a bus in 1976?

"Of course the book applies today," he says matter-of-factly. "Look at the unemployment, the distress. The whole story of *Christ in Concrete*, essentially, is about keeping a family together. You know what the vicious blows of unemployment and inflation do to a family: They destroy a family. Wanting to read the book today is a form of sympathetic magic."

[*Christ in Concrete*. By Pietro di Donato. Bobbs-Merrill. 303 pages. \$3.95 paperback, \$6.95 hardback.]