

Thursday

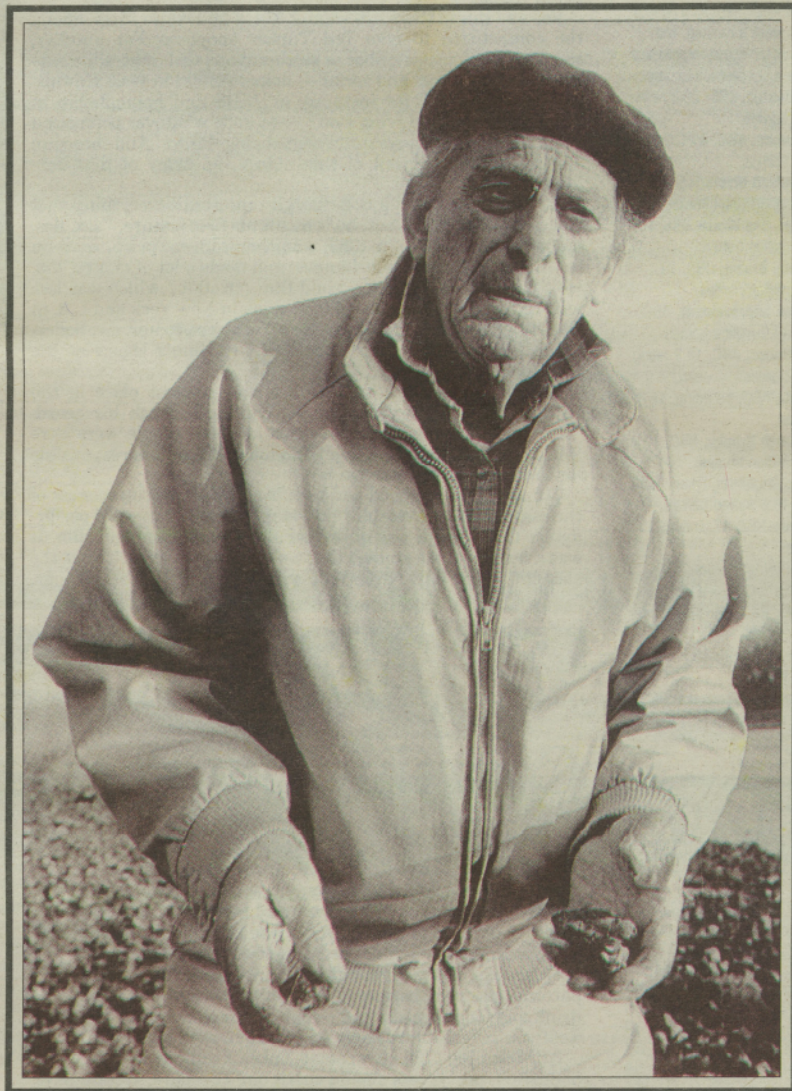
Newsday

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## PART II

**A**t his death this week, Pietro di Donato was a retired Long Island building contractor. But in 1939, he left an indelible mark on the literary world with his powerful novel 'Christ in Concrete' — a book that, to many, remains a classic of the Italian-American immigrant experience.

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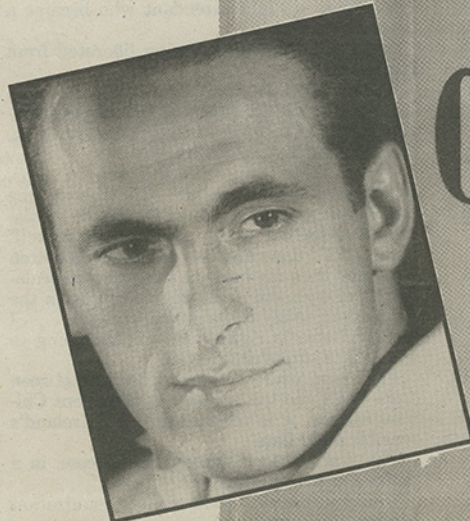


# The Bricklayer's Son

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# THE GREAT ITALIAN-AMERICAN NOVELIST

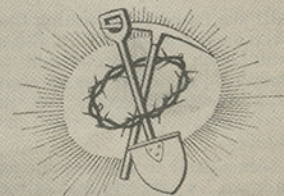
PIETRO DI DONATO CAME TO THE REALIZATION THAT HE HAD ONE GREAT BOOK IN HIM, AND THAT HE HAD WRITTEN IT HALF A CENTURY BEFORE. TRYING TO DUPLICATE IT WAS LIKE HITTING A BRICK WALL.



CHRIST  
*in*  
CONCRETE

BOBBS  
MERRILL

CHRIST  
*in*  
CONCRETE



A Novel by  
PIETRO DI DONATO

By Sidney C. Schaer  
STAFF WRITER

**L**AST AUGUST, during one of the summer's hottest spells, an 80-year-old man began building a small brick wall next to his house. When he finished a week later, the wall was about chest-high and 6 feet across, and the man stood proudly behind it. His son took some photographs.

"My father was the only man I knew who could by himself build his own monument," the son said on Tuesday, two days after his father's death from cancer.

The bricklayer was Pietro di Donato, and to a generation that survived the Depression he was the author of the 1939 classic saga of the Italian-American

immigrant experience, "Christ in Concrete."

The book, a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, was written a half-century ago by a man who had lived through the construction-site death of his immigrant father, and whose anger and pain were poured into a story about the lives of people whose only real sources of strength and survival were each other. Di Donato was 12 when his father was killed, and it fell to him to quit school and support his mother and seven brothers and sisters.

When the book was published, di Donato became a celebrity, a literary hero to children of all immigrants, but especially Italian-Americans. It was a status he could hardly have imagined after years of supporting his family in the one craft he knew, masonry work.

In subsequent years he would write other books, and short stories, and he would mingle with Ernest Hemingway in Cuba and Fiorello LaGuardia in New York. His first novel, written when he was 28, had given him his identity. But in the real world di Donato

had a family to support. He worked after World War II with his brother John in the construction business on Long Island, building homes, small office buildings and a movie theater in East Northport.

"I really think he was a bricklayer who writes," said his son Richard, who had been helping take care of his father since his mother, Helen, died in 1989.

What di Donato wrote in 1939 made him a literary icon — a writer who gave voice to the working man of Italian ancestry whose courage was to be found in family values and hard work, but who often found larger American society cruel and bigoted.

And while di Donato set the table for other writers of his heritage, he remained a lone voice, according to one of his admirers, author Gay Talese, who this month publishes his own book, "Unto the Sons," which traces the Italian-American experience through his and his family's life.

"When you ask yourself to make a list of writers of Italian-American ancestry, the one name you could

Di Donato was a handsome young bricklayer in 1939, left, when his novel was published. He had quit school at age 12 to support his family after his father was killed.

THE AUTHOR'S WORDS:  
A RECENT INTERVIEW. PAGE 66

always depend on was Pietro di Donato, and now he is gone," Talese said. "The question is why have there been so few?"

Talese theorizes that for Italian-Americans, the act of betraying family intimacies, of violating trust, is so powerful a cultural taboo that the result is a dearth of writers of Italian-American heritage.

For di Donato to have produced such a heartbreaking and intimate portrayal of immigrant Italian life, Talese says, his story must have had a force of its own. "It had to have been a personal explosion to break through those walls, a magical impulse to write that story."

Though it was a brief, shining moment half a century ago, di Donato's literary achievement can still be felt today in the lives of many Italian-Americans, including the son of an immigrant ditchdigger who became governor of New York and came to know di Donato personally.

"I have copies from Pietro di Donato that I treasure," Gov. Mario Cuomo said yesterday. "In the last days I tried very hard to reach him at the hospital . . . He is a great loss. The family, the sons, other people in his family know that di Donato's existence went far beyond the one book. But much of the world that didn't know anything other than 'Christ in Concrete' will know him forever as the author of one of the great works."

Cuomo says it is "a great book. It's a story so familiar to Italians, to any immigrants, to any children of immigrants. It happened to be his father who was a laborer, but it could have been a Polish ditchdigger, could have been a ditchdigger like my father, could have been a Jewish tailor, could have been anybody who came, fought, struggled, died young in the effort.

"And it was written in a very fascinating idiom. It was written as a kind of literal English translation of the Italian. Just read one page."

Michael D'Innocenzo, 56, a professor of history at Hofstra University, said the book's portrayal of the "Italian male work ethic" resonated for him. "He refers to a man's job with a capital J. For the Italian male — and it was true for my father and my relatives — everything revolved around the work. Part of it reflected the precariousness of existence, that they never knew how long a job would last." D'Innocenzo asserts part of the power of "Christ in Concrete" is that "it expressed the dignity of labor . . . the ethic that there was nothing wrong with sweating."

For a while the book was out of print, and di Donato, according to friends, felt he was being denied the recognition he deserved, although his brother John

## VOICE OF 'CHRIST': AN EXCERPT

A VOICE within him spoke in wordless language. The language of worn oppression and the despair of realizing that his life had been left on brick piles. And always, there had been hunger and her bastard, the fear of hunger. Murdin bore down upon Geremio from behind and shouted:

"Goddammit, Geremio, if you're givin' the men two hours off with pay, why the hell are they dragging their tail? And why don't you turn that skinny old Nick loose, and put a young wop in his place?"

"Now listen-a to me, Mister Murdin —"

"Don't give me that! And bear in mind that there are plenty of good barefoot men in the streets who'll jump for a day's pay!"

"Padrone — padrone, the underpinning gotta be made safe and . . ."

"Lissenyawopbastard! If you don't like it, you know what you can do!" And with that he swung swaggering away.

\* \* \*

The huge concrete hopper that was sustained by an independent structure of thick timber wavered a breath or so, its heavy concrete rolling uneasily until a great sixteen-inch wall caught it squarely with all

the terrific verdict of its dead weight and impelled it downward through joists, beams and masonry until it stopped short, arrested by two girders, an arms length about Geremio's head; the gray concrete gushing from the hopper mouth, and sealing up the mute figure.

. . . Geremio came to with a start . . . His brain told him instantly what had happened and where he was. He shouted wildly.

"Save me! Save me! I'm being buried alive. . ."

He paused exhausted. His genitals convulsed. The cold steel rod upon which they were impaled froze his spine. He shouted louder and louder . . . But the cries went no further than his own ears. The icy wet concrete reached his chin . . . Savagely he bit into the wooden form pressed upon his mouth. An eighth of an inch of its surface splintered off. Oh, if he could only hold out long enough to bite even the smallest hole through to air! He must! There can be no other way! He is responsible for his family! He cannot leave them like this! He didn't want to die! This could not be the answer to life! He had bitten halfway through when his teeth snapped off to the gums in the uneven conflict. / ■■



Di Donato was still building at age 80 last summer at his Setauket home. . . 'his own monument,' in his son Richard's words. 'I really think he was a bricklayer who writes,' said Richard.

Richard di Donato Photo