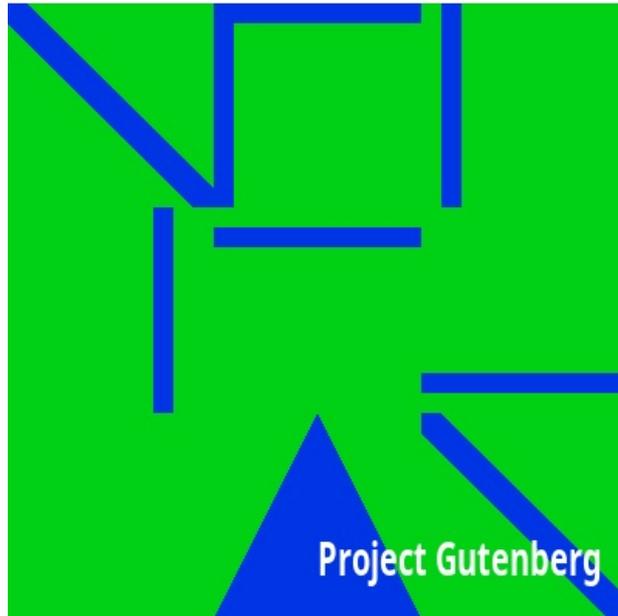

Mother America

Sam McClatchie



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOTHER AMERICA ***

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When a country is as champion-conscious as America, it's surprising that no one has yet developed the ultimate contest. Dr. McClatchie, whose recent novel, "The Last Vial," established him as a top-ranking sf writer, now tells us the engaging story of the geneticists' search for ...

Mother America

By SAM McCLATCHIE, M.D.

Illustrated by ADKINS

THE tall young man faded back quickly, poised for an instant and then threw a long high pass. The crowd came up roaring. Twenty yards from the goal line a smaller, sturdier player swerved quickly around the end and took the pass in his stride. With a beautiful curving run he tricked the fullback, crossed the line and then, showing no sign of effort, trotted back up the field and threw the ball to the umpire.

"Wonderful! What a magnificent runner that lad is! You're lucky to have him, George." The speaker, a trimly built, athletic man in his middle forties turned to his companion, talking loudly above the buzz of the crowd.

George Turner nodded agreement. "We are. Every other University in the States was after him. He's the first Boy America you know. We've been watching him for years."

"The first Boy America?" John Harmon echoed in surprise. "I didn't know that. You did say Boy America ... not All American?"

"He's both; All American in football and a Boy America too."

The gun signalled the end of the game and the two men rose from their box seats to go out. Directly below them the players trotted quickly towards the dressing rooms. Harmon leaned over to watch.

"There he is now. A fine-looking boy too!" He studied the young man's face intently. "Y'know he reminds me of somebody ... somebody I know well, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I'm not surprised. He's Gloria Manson's boy."

Harmon frowned. "No, that's not it, George. Of course there's the resemblance to his mother ... and who could forget the glorious Gloria even after twenty years. But it was the way he moved, and that smile." He shook his head. "It'll come to me yet."

They took the belt walk to the parking area and stepped off it at George's car. Moving quietly on its air cushion, the car joined the line-up out on the main road where George locked the controls on to Route 63. The speed rose to eighty and steadied as the car settled into its place in the traffic pattern. Relaxed in their seats the two men lit their anticancers and puffed contentedly as they watched the scenery. It would be another hour before George would need to touch the controls as they neared home.

"So he looks like someone you know?" George asked. "I'd like to know who it is just out of curiosity. As you are aware, no one but the Genetic Panel knows whose sperm is used to impregnate the Mother America."

"I haven't got it yet, George, but I will. Were you the geneticist for this boy?"

"Yes, I was. I told you he was Gloria Manson's. Don't you remember when you met her?"

"Soaring satellites!" Harmon exclaimed. "How could I forget? You introduced me to her."

"Twenty years ago," Turner mused. "What a crazy week that was. I guess you were glad to get back to the Space Force."

"In a way," Harmon agreed. "I've often wondered where you were since then. I never dreamed you'd be Dean of the Genetics Faculty when I came to the Space Engineering School."

"I hope you'll like it here," George said. "They couldn't have picked a better Director."

THE senator from Alaska had the floor. He had had it for several hours now and the chamber was almost empty as he droned on.

"And so, gentlemen, I feel that the greatest state in the union, the only state that can afford to increase its population because there is still some unoccupied space, the only state where anti-conception vaccination is not compulsory until after four children instead of two, the state where ordinary people will have room to get out and exercise instead of being spectators, this state of Alaska, I say, is the only state that should be considered when we select a fine, virile American male as the father of America's Child of the Year. I would dare to go farther and say we should also provide the female, Mother America of 1995, except that our President, my fellow Alaskan, has generously decided that no one state can have both mother and father. Alaska is a man's country. It should provide the man ..."

Wearily George Turner got up and turned off the colorvision. The political pressures were increasing rapidly; that was obvious. What had started as a national search for the most suitable future parents in America would soon be a free-for-all. He would have to give the committee his choice, and quickly! Back to his work he went; calculating possibilities, eliminating entrants one by one. The National Genetics Laboratory had been given the task of screening the finalists from each state and Turner, much against his will, had been selected by the Director to do the work.

"George," he'd said one fateful morning, "I have a job for you."

"What's that, sir?"

"You've seen the report of this new contest being run by Dee Lish Baby Foods, haven't you?"

"Can't say I have, sir. I've been working on that new sex gene. Haven't had time to read the papers."

"Oh? Well it all started on their colorvision program, the one where they select the All American babies. You've seen it haven't you?"

TURNER shook his head.

"Sputtering sputniks! I know you're all wrapped up in your work but it doesn't have to be a shroud. You'd better get out into the world a little." The Director laid a friendly arm on George's shoulder. "This job will be just the thing."

"What job?"

"Why, the contest! Dee Lish separate the babies into three groups. There's the natural All American baby selected from families in the two-baby group; then there's a prize for best baby in the unlimited family section. Naturally, since those parents are in the genetically superior group, it wouldn't be fair to pit them against the two-baby families. Then there's a class for babies of artificially impregnated mothers, both married and single. It's a very popular program. The prizes are wonderful and the winners in the limited family class are allowed to have more children than their quota, all expenses paid of course."

"I can see why it's popular all right," George said, "but where do I come in?"

"THREE months ago the Dee Lish scenario writers had a brainstorm. They reasoned that if they began a new contest to pick the most suitable mother in America and then had her impregnated, artificially of course, by the most suitable donor, they would stir up all sorts of excitement for the next nine months and produce a baby that should be a worldbeater. The mother would be given a tremendous annuity, for life, and the babe assured of all expenses right through college."

"It all sounds faintly nauseating to me."

"George, you're impossible. A geneticist who still believes in fortuitous breeding!"

"I'm not so darn sure we can pick 'em better any other way. We certainly haven't got all the answers."

"I agree, George, I agree," the Director's smile was still friendly, if a little strained. "This is a National Laboratory, however, and the President rang me up the other day and asked that we do the final screening."

"The President? But this is a commercial gag!"

"Not any longer, my boy. You see the Russians recently came out with a wonder drug, a sort of gene stimulator, that they claim produces highly intelligent and well-proportioned children. The Chinese now claim that, by using a controlled environment in their communes, they are producing a super race. We had to do something! Our side is going to claim that the union of a red-blooded American male and a modern capitalist female will produce offspring far superior to anything else in the world, thus demonstrating the supremacy of the American way of life."

"Dear God! Why pick me?"

"You're junior to all the others, for one thing. And besides, you'll still be around to see Boy America grow up."

"Boy America?"

"Each year there will be a new contest; a boy the first year, a girl the second and so on. You'll have to appear on colorvision of course. It will be a nice change for you, and good for the Laboratory too! New York is a grand town for a vacation."

"NEW YORK is a grand town for a vacation," George thought bitterly, as he parried the reporters' persistent questions in the lobby of Coloraudio System a week later.

"Say Doc, what about this super-female from Texas," one needler shouted above the babble.

"So what about her?" George said gruffly.

"Senator Bragg says she should be the one selected for Mother America."

"Look, friend, Senator Bragg is a Texan and a politician. Naturally he wants his state to have the honor. I'll pick the one I think best qualified!"

"Yeah, Doc, we know. But what is this super-female gag anyway?"

"Some women have more female sex genes than others. She happens to have the most ever reported to the Genetic Registry. Has the Senator seen her?"

"He didn't say."

"He should take a look sometime. She's five feet five, one hundred and sixty pounds and looks like a Texas longhorn, without the horns." He brushed past the reporter. "You got any more bright ideas?"

A New York reporter pulled on his coat sleeve. Annoyed by their persistence Turner shrugged free.

"Doctor Turner," the man said. "What do you think of this idea of using the Man from Mars as the male donor?"

"You mean Captain Jack Harmon of the Space Force?"

"Yes. He's in town for the big parade right now."

"Look, we can't tell you who the donor will be. It's against the law, remember?" Turner quoted the rule, "Under Section 48b, single females may bear children if they wish, when authorized by law, but are not allowed to pick the donor. He must remain anonymous. The local Genetics Panel does the choosing. Besides, Harmon has been in space for months. Who knows what changes there may be in his sex glands."

They reached the conference room and entered. The Dee Lish representative looked at his watch and raised his hands.

"Gentlemen, no more questions please. We have a program on the air tonight and Doctor Turner has to be prepared." When the room cleared he turned to George. "Doctor, will you be ready to name the winner on tonight's program?"

Turner shook his head. "You know I've interviewed all the finalists but one, Miss Gloria Manson. Until I see her I can't decide. I haven't talked to her at all but her press agent

promised he would have her here this afternoon."

"That's Gloria Manson the actress-dramatist?"

"Yes, the one who wrote *The Canals of Mars* and takes the female lead."

"Roaring rockets! If she wins what a blastoff that will be."

"I don't understand."

"We have arranged with the Mayor of New York that the winner will ride with Captain Jack Harmon tomorrow in the big parade celebrating his return from Mars. And Miss Manson is the star in a hilarious hit about space. What could be better?"

"To stop the whole damn foolishness altogether," said George gloomily and ignored the hurt look on the press agent's face.

THEY were getting up to leave when the door burst open and slammed against the wall. A tall, beautifully dressed and shaped brunette brushed aside a little man who was trying to talk to her and strode into the room. Her green eyes narrowed like a cat's after a bird.

"Which of you is the geneticist?" she demanded, and then to George, "You ... you must be ... you aren't dressed like a business man. Your suit is five years out of style."

Abashed, George looked at himself. "What's wrong with it?"

"You'd never understand and I haven't time to tell you. What I want to know is, who gave you the right to use my name in this silly Mother America contest. And you," she turned on the Dee Lish agent, "quit gawping at me. I'm not going to blast off. Who are you anyway?"

"Miss Manson, please!" The little man was in front of her again. "If the reporters hear about this ..."

"Oh shut up, Harry! All right, Doctor, what's your excuse?"

George rallied and attacked. "I haven't any, Miss Manson. I didn't ask for your name. It was submitted to me as a possibility from the Dee Lish Company. You needn't worry, however. You are displaying adequate reasons for me to disqualify your entry right now."

"Oh, an advertising stunt, is it? Harry, this is your idea ... you and that pap purveyor!"

"But Gloria, think of the publicity ... the big parade with the man from Mars! Why your play would run for years!"

"OK, I'll do it!" she said with a big smile and watched the ad-men's gloomy faces change to astonished delight. "There's just one little thing ... if I win!" She prodded Harry in the chest with a long stiff finger.

"Yes, dear ... anything!"

"*YOU* have the baby!" The scowl came back to her face. "You utter idiots ... you misfired missiles! How in the Universe do you think I can play a romantic lead wearing a maternity dress?"

George chuckled with delight at the thought and she turned on him.

"What's so funny, Doctor? And what do you mean I'm disqualified from the contest? What's wrong with me?"

"Not a thing, Miss Manson." He grinned happily at her. "But if you can stand having dinner with a man in an old-fashioned suit, I'll tell you why Mother America should be a contented cow instead of a tantalizing tigress."

"Hm, this is one orbit I haven't travelled." She smiled and nodded her approval. "Set me a course, Navigator."

They moved towards the door together.

"Doctor! The program tonight ... have you forgotten?"

George looked back and waved airily. "Don't worry. I'll be there. And we'll name the winner too!"

"WELL now, Gloria, the dessert!" George was saying. "What'll it be, crepes suzette?"

She smiled across the table. "Mm," she considered the menu carefully. "I think I'll stick to good old American apple pie and cheese."

"A genuine American small town girl, with small town likes and dislikes! That's what you are underneath the glamour. Aren't you?"

She laughed and raised her champagne glass. "And this is from the home-town vineyard too?"

George leaned towards her, his face a little flushed with the wine. "Gloria, with your ability as an actress we could play the biggest practical joke in the history of colorvision. If only I dared!"

"What's your idea, George?"

"I'm sick of all this pseudo-scientific nonsense about genetics," he said, "and I'm even sicker of the crass commercialism and political propaganda surrounding this Mother America business."

"George, you surprise me more and more! I thought you did this for the money and publicity, to say nothing of the great honor."

"Stop kidding, Gloria! You know I was ordered to do it by the Department. All I get is an expense account from Dee Lish Baby Foods. The thing that really bothers me is the type of winner I have to pick."

"Have to pick? You have free choice, don't you?"

"Not really. The people who watch that program, from the President on down, including our Director too, expect a sweet wholesome type ... you know, curvy in the right places like a Miss America but wouldn't think of posing in a bathing suit. They want an adolescent dream girl type, the kind that goes well with a rose-covered cottage and four rosy-cheeked kids all waiting for Daddy to come home."

"But most women work in America today."

"I know but the dream remains, along with the cowboy, the daring Air Force pilot, the self-made business tycoon and all the other romantic stereotypes of the first half of the century. She makes togetherness seem right, and God knows we have so many people today we're together whether we like it or not. So that's the type I have to pick."

"Where does the joke come in?"

"If you'd play the part of the American dream girl you'd win that contest going away, like a four stage rocket booster."

"But I don't want to have a baby by remote control."

"You wouldn't have to. You can always withdraw before the impregnation ceremony."

"Suppose I do it, what's the point?"

"Well for one thing, you'd show how easily people are fooled by appearances and smart propaganda. As a geneticist I can only go so far and be honest. I can make sure you have good heredity; that you have no obvious physical or mental defects; that your chance of having certain disabling diseases are small; that your intelligence is high, and so on. I can't really measure things such as initiative, wit, courage, determination, all the things that make one human so much better than another of equal physical and mental capacity."

"Educated people know that already."

"True, but it needs constant emphasis or it is forgotten under the propaganda. Besides, I don't believe in mating people like cattle or slaves. That's why this whole thing is a travesty of love and marriage. I hate being used to give it a semblance of scientific authenticity. I'm

going to declare the top four contestants equal. They are, as far as I am concerned, genetically speaking. The audience will decide the winner. They'll love it and so will the sponsor. The other three are real American dream girls. I want you to outsmart them at their own game ... and tell America later what a farce it all was."

"You really are a romantic, underneath the cynicism," Gloria said wonderingly. "I didn't think scientists were built with hearts any more." She reached across and took his hand. "But I like you that way. Do you think I could do it?"

"Easily. Just pretend you are Ellen the Earthling from that comedy of yours. That's the type they want."

"Yes, but when I bow out later they'll be calling me Marina the Martian Menace ... that won't be so funny."

"They won't, Gloria. You can laugh it off as a publicity stunt and get them laughing with you. Who knows, it might even stop this mad fad of career women having babies without a proper home and a father to raise them."

She laughed. "Are you afraid you're going to be replaced by a machine, George?" her eyes twinkled with amusement.

He grinned. "Oh, we still have our uses. Time to go. Will you do it?"

She stood up. "I'll play it by ear. If the audience is the type you say they are, it will be a pleasure."

THE parade was over. Now, as they waited for the banquet and the speeches to begin, John Harmon spoke to Turner.

"You're a lucky man, George."

"Why?"

"Spending so much time with Gloria. She had me laughing all the way up Wall Street with her remarks about the parade. If I didn't have to go back to the base tomorrow I'd steal her for a date." He turned to Gloria. "I mean it, honey. You really leave me weightless!"

Gloria smiled at him. "I'll take a recount, John. We can blast off some other time."

After the banquet the Mayor of New York made the major address of the evening. "And so, ladies and gentleman," he concluded, "you have seen today two people who represent the end of one era and the beginning of another. The lovely lady on my right is to be the first Mother America. For the first time in history, our nation is actively planning our future citizens. It is true that for years now, with the help of the Genetics Laboratories, represented so ably by Doctor Turner, individual citizens have planned their parenthood, but never before have a President and Congress given their approval, their official blessing, for such a purpose. This then is a milestone we have passed, a point in our history we will never forget."

"They'll never forget me either when I back out," Gloria whispered to George. "I'm getting worried. We're in too deep."

"Don't be scared, baby," George said. "I'll get you out of it, if you have to fall sick to do it." He patted her arm reassuringly but somehow, without the rosy glow of a bottle of wine to color this view, the joke didn't seem as funny as it had the previous night.

The Mayor continued. "Another point in our history was passed when this young man on my left, at that time Captain, now Major John Harmon of the Space Force, returned from Mars. He and his crew represent the end of our isolation in space. The Moon, after all, is a satellite of Earth. Mars is another planet, and Major Harmon has landed there. We are not likely in our time to see another such event since the next big step, beyond the Solar System, will require a technology we do not possess. So, ladies and gentlemen, you, tonight, are witnessing the beginning of a new age, an age of supermen borne by women of America, such as Gloria Manson, and led by heroes such as John Harmon. I propose we drink a toast to them ... together."

AFTERWARDS, in Gloria's apartment, the three of them sat and talked until late. Then John Harmon looked at his watch and got up to leave.

"I have to catch the ramjet out of La Guardia," he said. "We start planning the next space trip in Colorado tomorrow, or rather this morning. It's been fun." He shook George's hand and kissed Gloria quickly. "I'll be seeing you one of these days."

George shut the door behind him. "I guess I'd better go now," he said.

"No! Have one for the road," Gloria said quickly. "I want to talk to you."

George poured another Scotch. "You still worried?"

"A bit," she admitted. "What is the next step?"

"Now I'm supposed to pick the male donor."

"I thought you'd done that already."

"No. You see we have to know what blood types the female has and what her genetic structure is; whether she has any antibodies against sperm and so on, before we pick the male. To do it before the winner is picked would entail a lot of unnecessary work."

"Then we still have some time before the impregnation ceremony?"

"I can stall for maybe four weeks ... no longer. You see I have to consider your cycle too." He got up to go. "Gloria, I guess I was half lit last night. I'm sorry. It was a damn-fool idea."

She came close to him. "But you really do believe in the old-fashioned marriage, even if not in the old-fashioned girl?"

"Yes, I do. I still think people should be in love and not just mated because a calculating machine says they'll produce superior offspring."

"You're sweet." She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. The kiss lasted ... and lasted. Finally George broke it off.

"My God!" he mumbled. "Don't we have enough problems, without this?"

THREE weeks later, on Monday, George announced he had a suitable donor. The New York Genetics Panel, in session, considered the records and announced that permission was granted for one Gloria Manson, spinster, of New York City, to bear a child by artificial impregnation. The date was set for Wednesday. On Tuesday night George went to Gloria's apartment.

"What are we going to do?" Gloria asked as she watched George wearing a path on the rug. "We've left it awfully late."

"I couldn't do anything else," George said. "We can't plead illness as I'd hoped to do. This afternoon the panel decided on a last minute independent medical check to be sure you're OK. That means I can't fake it and there's no time to give you a cold or some mild illness now. Somehow I've got to stall past the fertile period and then we will have another month to think of something."

"How long is the fertile period?"

"Our tests show that in your case it is approximately twenty-four hours and begins about midnight tonight."

"Couldn't I disappear for a day or pretend I'm frightened of having a baby and call it off? Goodness knows we're both getting frightened right now." She poured out two stiff drinks.

"You can't just quit, Gloria. The whole nation has been whipped up into hysteria over this business, both by the politicians in their anticommunist speeches and by the sponsors on Coloraudio system. I never dreamed it could put a whole country into orbit ... but it has. We'll both be ruined if I can't figure a way out that doesn't anger the public." He drained his glass and began pacing again.

"If I have to go on with it can't you at least do something to prevent conception?" Gloria asked. "I don't mean vaccination. I want to have children later. I can stand the ceremony if I know I won't become pregnant."

"In that case I could give you a shot of antiserum against sperm," George said. "That would stop pregnancy all right."

"Would it make me sterile for long?"

"Oh no ... no! I wouldn't use pooled serum from all types anyway. You see we make some specific serum when we are testing each donor and it works only against the sperm of that particular man."

"Then we're all right? All I need is a shot?"

George shook his head. "I'm afraid to risk it, Gloria. They'll probably examine your blood tomorrow. If they found the specific antibody, or even a general antisperm antibody, that would really get us into trouble for fraud." He shook his head. "No. I'm afraid that's not the answer. I don't know what to do." He poured another drink and downed it.

"George," Gloria wailed, her control breaking at last, "I don't want a test-tube husband, a parent by proxy. I want a man!" She began to cry.

He came over to the couch and dropped down beside her. "Darling, please! Please don't cry. There must be a way to beat this." He took her in his arms.

THE aircar warning light came on and the buzzer sounded. George unhooked the automatic pilot and took over. They swung into University City and across the campus to the Faculty residential area.

"I certainly was lucky to find a job here on retirement from the Space Force," John Harmon said. "It was good of you to invite me to stay the week-end. Are you sure Mrs. Turner won't mind?"

"Quite sure." George smiled. "She's been looking forward to meeting you." He pulled the car into a spacious port and opened the front door of the house for Harmon. A tall, good-looking brunette moved to meet them.

"So nice to meet you, Mrs. ..." Harmon began automatically. "Great mountains of the moon! Gloria ... Gloria Manson!" He turned to George. "You didn't tell me."

"You mean you didn't know?" Gloria asked, and kissed him affectionately.

"I found out that he didn't. He was back in space at the time we were married." George said. "I wanted to surprise him." A happy smile creased his face.

Harmon stared at him. "Oh no!" he said and began to laugh. They watched him, astonished. He tried to talk. "George ... ha, ha ... Wonderful!" He convulsed again, struggled to a chair and collapsed. "The boy ..." he whispered weakly between great whoops.

"The boy? Then you guessed!" The wide smile split George's face again.

"Yes, that smile ... couldn't miss it. But how?" Harmon had recovered. They went into the living room and sat down to talk.

"So there we were," George concluded, "tanking up on lox and nothing coming out but smoke. I was getting a bit woozy when Gloria asked me what time it was.

"I looked at my watch. 'It's midnight,' I said. That did it.

"'Midnight!' she screeched and gave me the green-eyed tiger look. 'Well, George Turner, maybe you can't think of something ... but I can!'

"About nine in the morning the secretary of the panel called my room at the hotel. 'The ceremony is at ten, Doctor!' she said. 'We are waiting for you.'

"Man, what a head I had! You could have pushed the Destruct button and I'd never have known. Anyway I got to the hospital and there was Gloria, looking absolutely beautiful. There were press photographers everywhere. We went through with the ceremony and that

was that. Nine months later, with a lot of sonic booming, Boy America was born. You saw him today."

"But he looks like you," John protested.

"He should," Gloria said. "He's his."

"But ..." John hesitated. "I don't want to pry, but how can you be sure?"

Gloria laughed. "Well, I know what we did the first couple of hours after midnight. You tell him the rest, George."

"There isn't much else to tell," George said. "After the ceremony I gave her a shot of the specific antiserum as soon as I could get her alone. Later the committee examined her blood. They found she was pregnant so nobody even thought of testing for antisperm bodies. Then the boy was born. Naturally I was a bit concerned. I took blood samples and did genetic studies. There was no doubt. He was my son."

"And nobody ever suspected?" Harmon asked.

"No," Turner said. "The law prescribes examination before pregnancy but not afterwards. We were married three months later and everybody was very happy. As for the boy looking like me, everyone who has noticed it assumes I picked a donor like myself. It would be a natural inclination."

"So much for planned parenthood in the new era," Harmon chuckled. "The poor Mayor of New York! If only he knew." He grinned slyly. "Somehow I always did like the old way best."

THE END

As a service to our readers, we list the "Hugo" award winners for 1960:

Best Fan Mag: "Who Killed Science Fiction"—Earl Kemp

Best SF Artist: Ed Emshwiller

Best Short Story: "The Longest Voyage" by Poul Anderson

Best Dramatic Work: "The Twilight Zone"

Best SF Magazine: *Analog*

Best Novel: "A Canticle for Leibowitz" by Walter Miller, Jr.

These were presented at the 19th annual World Science Fiction Convention held in Seattle, Washington, September 1-4.

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