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Charity: The Ultimate Luxury

Joan Kroc gave \$225 million to National Public Radio at her death even though she hadn't been a devoted listener or regular donor.

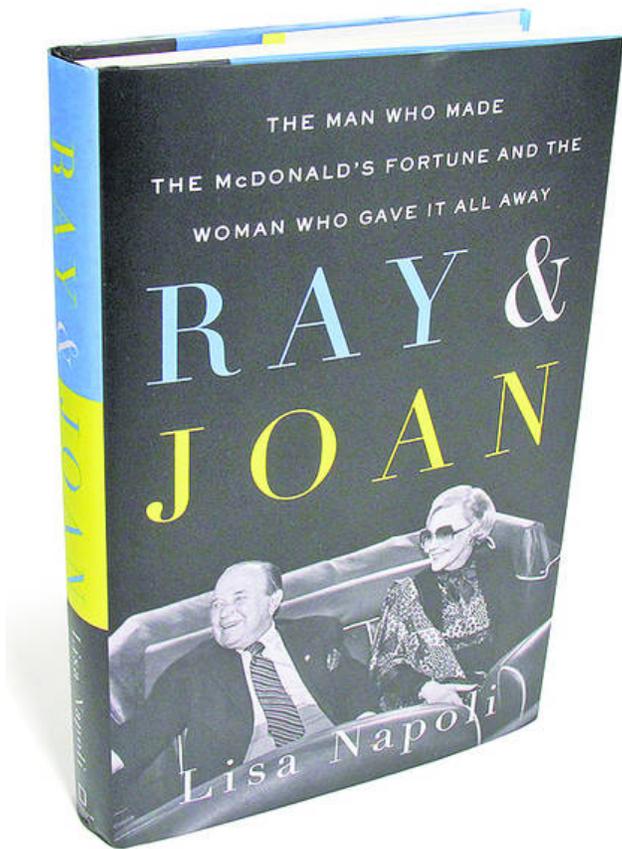
By **MARC LEVINSON**

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Back in the 1950s, when television pictures were mostly black and white and the console set in the living room weighed 100 pounds, a character named John Beresford Tipton made a weekly appearance across America. Tipton, whose face never appeared on screen, was described by his former secretary as “a fabulously wealthy and fascinating man.” His hobby was giving away money. In each episode, the secretary received a check from Tipton’s hands and delivered it to an unsuspecting individual of Tipton’s choice in return for a signed promise never to reveal the source. The check was in the amount of one million dollars.

A nonfiction version of “The Millionaire” might replace Tipton with Joan Kroc. The widow of Ray Kroc, the man whose boundless ambition built McDonald’s into a global purveyor of burgers and fries, Joan Kroc used her inheritance to become one of the biggest philanthropists in America. From AIDS patients in the Bronx to teenagers in San Diego, people who had never heard of Joan Kroc benefited from her largess. Much of her giving was as secret as she could keep it, and almost all of it was quirky. As Lisa Napoli shows in her breezy book “Ray & Joan,” Joan Kroc gave away money because she enjoyed doing so, and it was none of anybody else’s business.

Neither Joan nor Ray was to the manor born. Ray Kroc, the son of Czech immigrants, was an inveterate salesman. After a long career hawking paper cups, underwater lots in Florida and malted-milk mixers, in 1954 he convinced brothers Maurice and Dick McDonald to make him the franchising agent for their tiny chain of hamburger stands. Joan, 26 years younger, was the daughter of a railroad worker. What the two had in common was a love of music: In the 1920s, Ray supplemented his income by playing piano live on the radio, while Joan supplied background music at bars and restaurants. They met around 1957, when Ray saw the alluring—and married—blonde playing the piano at a St. Paul, Minn., restaurant. Joan was smitten not just with Ray but with the opportunity he represented. Ray Kroc made sure that Joan’s husband soon won a franchise in Rapid City, S.D., giving her an entrée into middle-class life.



RAY & JOAN

By Lisa Napoli

(Dutton, 353 pages, \$27)

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Ray Kroc found many excuses to visit Rapid City, but it took a dozen years and multiple divorces before the two were wed in 1969. By then Kroc and his associates had transformed McDonald's from an overleveraged speculation to the darling of the New York Stock Exchange. Joan took to the lifestyle of a CEO's wife: a new wardrobe, a 5,300-square-foot condo with an organ hidden in a wall, a private jet. But their match was not made in heaven. Ray Kroc was a volatile alcoholic, and Joan seems to have been no less volatile. In 1971, she sued him for divorce, then abruptly called off the separation. Their marriage remained rocky.

Philanthropy became Joan's way to establish an identity of her own. She began in 1976 by creating Operation Cork—Kroc spelled backward—to support scientific research on alcoholism. The Ray A. Kroc Foundation was transformed into the Joan B. Kroc Foundation, and after Ray died in early 1984 she took full charge. She arranged to meet onetime Saturday Review editor Norman Cousins, the author of a best-selling book describing how positive attitudes could stave off illness, and offered \$2 million to support his research. She gave \$100,000 to help the victims of a mass shooting at a McDonald's near her San Diego home and pumped millions into promoting peace and nuclear disarmament. The San Diego Zoo received \$100,000 after reviving an injured hummingbird that Joan found near her house. When she decided that the kids in a poor San Diego neighborhood needed a first-class recreation center, she called the local Salvation Army chapter out of the blue and offered \$80 million to build and run it.

In 1991, Joan closed the foundation and began making gifts personally in order to avoid public disclosure. The final third of "Ray & Joan" is a compilation of everything the author can discover about Joan Kroc's generosity. The list is puzzling: Greenpeace in 1987; the Epilepsy Society in 1989; North Dakota flood victims in 1997. Joan Kroc was not a cautious donor like Andrew Carnegie or Bill Gates, devoting years to planning how to give away wealth to achieve some desired impact. She had no master plan for the causes she deemed most important. Her interest, as she told Norman Cousins, was "the human condition." And her whims could be erratic. When she wrote a \$5 million check to former University of Notre Dame President Theodore Hesburgh on the occasion of his 85th birthday, Ms. Napoli reports, "she sent a maid scrambling through the house to find a stamp with the new postage rate on it, so she didn't have to overpay by using two of the old ones."

These days, Joan Kroc is best remembered for the \$225 million that she left to National Public Radio at her death in 2003. At the time, this was the largest cash gift ever received by a U.S. cultural institution, and NPR still thanks her on the air regularly. As with many of her gifts, the motivation was not clear; she wasn't known as a devoted listener and had not been a regular contributor through the years.

Does philanthropy of this sort serve any larger purpose? Ms. Napoli suggests that digging too deeply into the motivation for Joan Kroc's giving misses the point. Philanthropy, she believes, gave Kroc both pleasure and a sense of independence, much like commissioning a \$40 million yacht on which to entertain her friends and zipping off to a Broadway show aboard her private jet. "There was nothing stodgy or formulaic about her approach to giving," Ms. Napoli writes. "So what if it registered as unorthodox or downright kooky to traditionalists? Joan was relaxing into the ultimate luxury, of being able to indulge her whims—with no concern about cost, outcome, or, better yet, what anyone else thought."

Mr. Levinson's latest book, "An Extraordinary Time: The End of the Postwar Boom and the Return of the Ordinary Economy," was published earlier this month.

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