

**"Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary"  
[A Biographic Narrative Interview With Mary Gergen]**

Kip Jones

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**Abstract:**

*Method:* The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Prue CHAMBERLAYNE, Joanna BORNAT & Tom WENGRAF, 2000; Tom WENGRAF 2001; Gabriele ROSENTHAL 2004; Kip JONES 2004) uses an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question (minimalist-passive), for example, "Tell me the story of your life," to elicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This shift encompasses willingness on the part of the researcher to cede "control" of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. A follow-up sub-session can then be used to ask additional questions, but based only on what the interviewee has said in the first interview and using her/his words and phrases in the same order. Through hypothesising how the lived life informs the told story, the case history is then finally constructed from the two separate threads of the "lived life" and the "told story."

In this paper, the "lived life" and "told story" are presented in a "raw" form with the further involvement of the reader in mind. The story has not been "analysed" by the interviewer, but left open and transparent. Still, the production of the story becomes the creative output and social construction of both the storyteller and the interviewer (the performer and the audience) and, in this case particularly, one story of many stories that could have been told by the person interviewed. Routine facts are often back-grounded by the narrator through the use of this method in favour of spontaneity in the storytelling and the creation of meaningful life metaphors. In this way, the personal journey to "who the interviewee is today" is described, rather than merely a list of accomplishments.

*"The Lived Life":* Mary GERGEN (née McCANNEY) was born in 1938. The first part of her childhood was spent in the small town of Balaton, Minnesota. She subsequently moved with her family to Minneapolis when she was 12. She attended a suburban middle-class high school where she was popular. She went on to the University of Minnesota after graduating high school and continued to be both a gifted student, well-liked and social. In her final year she met an architecture student and married

him shortly after graduation. The couple had a girl, Lisa, and a boy, Michael. Over the next seven years, Mary studied part-time for a Master's Degree in Counselling Psychology. Her husband was a fast track architect and they expected to move to Rome in the early 60s, but moved instead to Boston where he could continue his studies at MIT.

At a Halloween party given at Harvard, Mary met Ken GERGEN for the first time. They had a long conversation and she discovered that he had an opening for a research assistant, a position for which she immediately applied. She got the job and Ken encouraged her to finish her Master's Degree. She worked for him for two years; he later accepted a position at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, leaving Harvard (and Mary) behind.

Both of their marriages began to end. Ken received a fellowship to study in Rome and Mary and her two children left with him on a ship to Rome in 1968. They were married in October of 1969. Back at Swarthmore, they began to work together on experimental projects, antiwar protests, etc. Ken and Mary lived and worked in Japan in 1972-73. By the mid-70s, Mary realised that she wanted a PhD and became a graduate student at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1974 where she quickly became involved in teaching. In 1976-77 the couple spent a year in Paris.

After receiving her PhD, Mary worked for a time at AT&T doing longitudinal studies on managers' lives. Eventually, she got a teaching job at the Pennsylvania State University local campus, fifteen minutes drive from their house, where she went through the ranks from assistant professor to associate professor to full Professor of Psychology and of Women's Studies. In 1988-89 Ken and Mary went to Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, but Ken spent most of the year at Heidelberg in Germany, leaving Mary on her own in the Netherlands.

She and Ken persist in teaching and are involved in the Taos Institute promoting social constructionist ideas, as well as co-editing *The Positive Aging Newsletter*. Mary continues to travel, teach, write and give papers and workshops. Recent publications

include *Social Construction: A Reader* with Ken GERGEN and *Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology Narrative, Gender, and Performance*.

**Key words:** *Mary Gergen, Ken Gergen, social constructionism, feminism, biographic narrative*

Credits

References

Author

Citation

## The Told Story:

*I couldn't help*

*but wanna start*



## Back before my birth

To create a setting  
For (myself)

[Within a family] and

Also [within a generation] and

[Within a historical period] and

[Within a particular place].

I guess that I want you to remember the movie,

*"The Last Picture Show"*

but perhaps you will recall that there's a

I hope you have seen that movie,

**Main Street**

*The Last Picture Show.* Just as our lives are discontinuous, with jarring scene changes and ridiculous episodes of embarrassing events, so is life presented to us in this small town. The film's purposely jarring editing is transformed in our minds, as we watch, from a disjointed amalgam to a stream of consciousness effect that is very lifelike. One knows, then, that you are entering an alternative world just as real in its way as your own. This movie pulls you in.

The center of the film and the major theme – should you listen to your heart or your libido if the two don't combine in the same person? Perhaps the saddest comment in this film is that too often these two halves to a whole do not come together as a package and people are forced to choose.

Eric HABEGGER, 1999. *The Last Picture Show* (Review). Internet Movie Database.

**[Main Street]:** I guess it's a symbol of great hopes for a metropolis ah, but it's a village with seven hundred and thirteen people in it. The town is called **Balaton**.



Balaton had a grain elevator, in fact three of them, at the end of this street—there was a park with a bandstand, and then there were the railroad tracks and the elevators. And the elevators contained grain and grain was the principle ah, export of the farming communities around this rural town in south-western Minnesota. There was Laura Ingles Wilder, a writer who wrote stories about a family who lived in Minnesota in

the 1800's and the most famous book was called, *The Little House on the Prairie*. And I identify with that kind of locale.

## ***When I was a child there were periods of time where I was QUITE BORED.***

My mother when she was in High School met the travelling salesman who would come through town. My mother, who was 18, became pregnant before the marriage, I think on St. Patrick's Day, actually. And my **FATHER**, um and my mother were married when he was 29 and she was 18.

Q u i t e a **L A R G E** a g e g a p b e t w e e n t h e m .

Dad was the 'boss' , and Mom was the respectful and respected wife.

† My **FATHER**,  
† my sister  
† and I



were the only **Catholics** in that town.  
(I think that it's kind of important that that was the case.)

- ✚ My family, my **FATHER** and the dentist were the some of the most educated people.
- ✚ My **FATHER** who was the intellect and the one I most admired in that respect, and who I most wanted to please.
- ✚ My mother was somebody that I felt I had some superiority over.

*(an/and yet  
I loved her  
and she loved me.  
and who I was.)*

[I haven't mentioned that my sister was born in 1940]

**I was the politician and the negotiator and ah,  
the one who could get along just fine with everyone.**

## PHYSICALLY

my mother was

- lighter skinned and
- lighter brown hair and
- green eyes,
- smallish (uhm) and
- pretty and
- very young, and

*( I always ah took a certain pride  
in how pretty and young she was  
in the course of the world.)*

My **FATHER** was

- ✓ handsome,
- ✓ athletic,
- ✓ dark skinned,
- ✓ **dark black hair,**
- ✓ brilliant blue eyes

**T H E N > >>**

## The omnipresence of the war.

*Everything in that small town was orientated toward the absence of the sons.*



I was in a little group of children that were all born at the same time and there were four **boys** and me. I was in this family where I was the oldest and the oldest **girl**, and there were two younger **girls** and then the rest were these little **boys**. So, I never had this sort of inordinate respect for **boys** my age or younger. I also (pause) was (pause) one of the best students in our class. But I do think that I had this real sense of ownership and belonging and ah, you know that I was somebody in this little town.

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When I was 12 we had to *move* to Minneapolis because [my **FATHER** ] had been promoted.

*[He was not very self-promoting and I think that was a problem].*

We had to leave, it was very hard.

**No!** it wasn't hard, I was looking *forward* to it,  
I thought it would **great**,  
I thought it would be like **Balaton**,

*Only* **b i g g e r .**

*I started to  
collect movie  
star pictures.*





*When I was a girl, I saved up my stars for my piano lesson successes to trade for movie tickets that could be redeemed at the local theatre. I used to save them for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans movies. She was the only female cowboy movie star, married to Roy in real life.. and I really identified with her. My favorite cowboy stars. (They also had singing). I even played ukulele in 6th grade, and had outdoor, cowboy fantasies. In fact at Catholic Confirmation, you were supposed to receive a vocational plan (to be a nun, they hoped), and I could see myself out west, in charge of a ranch-orphanage. (At that time, age 12, no men in sight... just me and my girlfriends running the place.)*

**[**Anyway, we moved to **Minneapolis**. I had the worse year of my life. These girls were girlie girls. They played jacks, skipped rope, and sat around and they even started to like boys. **]**

I joined the sort of not goody-good popular group, and I stayed with those people all through high school.

My body changed and  
I became

*um,*  
a lot more attractive

**[and never really fashionable, but certainly trying]**

and,

*um* (PAUSE)

I suddenly

could have **boy**friends.

I could have

**any boy**

**I wanted**

and I

**r a n through them**

# *The centre of my life was* (sort of) *to be socially successful.*

I was a car-hop, uh just like in *American Graffiti*,



*[The film is about a group of recently graduated teenagers and their stories during one night of cruising the streets the relative innocence of the summer of 1962. The lives of several high school grads are exposed here on the last night they will all be together].*

only NO roller skates.

I went to the *University of Minnesota*;

*(Social life was just as important as getting good grades)*

Broke up with my boyfriend,

*[not because there was anything at all wrong with him but I was so sick of being tied down]*

And I just went on a spree and Had a really good time and

F E L T F R E E .

In my senior year (pause)

I got engaged and ah, (pause)

to an architectural student

and I did go home and

I was married in June,

I was pregnant in July and

had my first child the following April.

Ah, Lisa, and *ah*

then 18 months later

I had my second child,

a little boy Michael

more or less staying at home

go back *I started to*  
to graduate school  
(seven or so years)

## Masters Degree in Counselling Psychology

My husband had um, (pause) he was ah, a *fast track* architect,  
Architecture was his **WHOLE LIFE**.

He was on the track for the *Prix de Rome* and we were going to go to

Rome



to live, and

---

*I was real excited about that because*

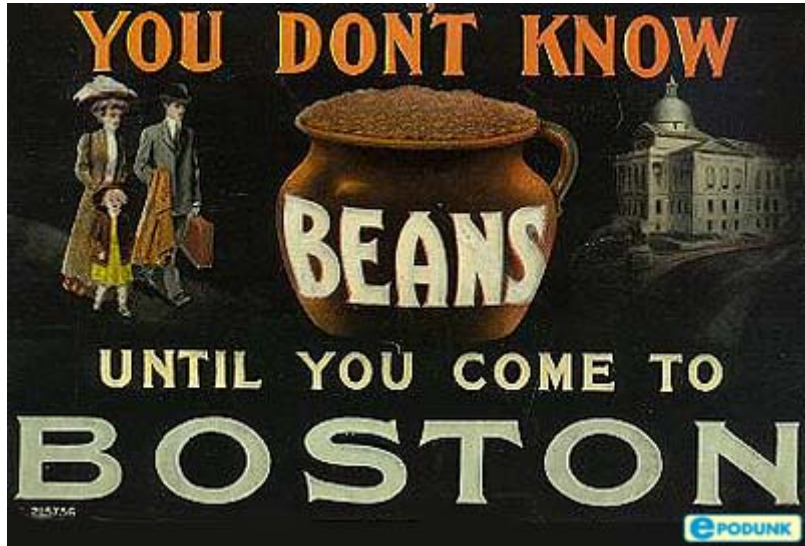
[Although I had wanted to go to Europe at various times,



there never was the **money**  
for it.]



# *(However),* We ended up in **Boston**



and

that's when I got a job  
working at *Harvard* for

\*\*\*\*\*



**K e n G E R G E N**

*The reason that I got a job was that he had a friend who was an architect who was our friend, and there was a Halloween party and we were invited to this Halloween party and when I came in, in 1965 people were saying that Ken and his wife had come as psychological concepts and what were these concepts? And I found out and told people what the concepts were and it was rather appropriate and suggestive of his marriage, which was he had come as the ID and she had come as the Super Ego.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*I met Kenneth that night*  
and found out that he had an opening for a **Research Assistant**,  
[he had just gotten a grant],  
and  
**we sat on the s**

**t  
a  
i  
r  
s**



Marilyn Monroe & Tom Ewell in  
"The Seven Year Itch"

and had this conversation  
that was

*marvellous!*

**a n d**  
that I have to say  
that despite the fact  
that I was in a perfectly okay marriage (PAUSE)

with a person who was highly talented and  
**A NICE GUY,**

(who was **not** exactly on my wave length ...)  
[mine was more intellectual]

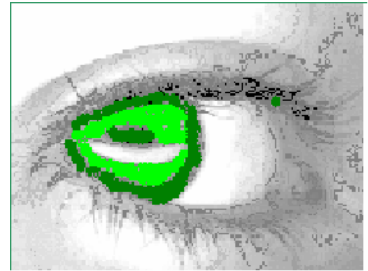
*that I have to say*  
*in some way*

*I fell in **LOVE***  
*with **Ken***  
*that*  
*night.*

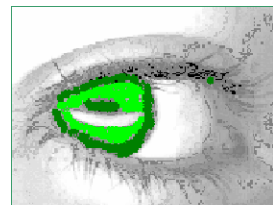


( *I also noticed that*

every other woman  
at the party  
seemed to be  
in LOVE



And so that was  
ah,  
an interesting observation  
with him too.)  
on my part.



Then he took a job



at

and moved to

Swarthmore;

[I continued on at **Harvard** for another year]

**My marriage**

*ah,*  
began to **END**

*and*

His marriage  
began to **END**,

*and*  
*ah*

*at the culmination of*

*the ENDings,*

Ken had won a

*Guggenheim Fellowship*

to **Rome**



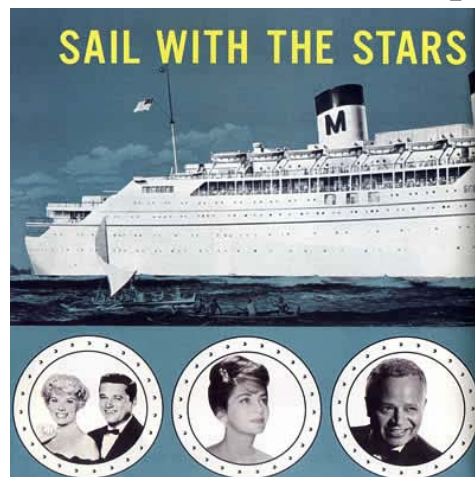
and **he**  
*ah,*

and **I** and

my two children

**left together**

**on a ship**





“  
I realize that what seemed to be the ways of the world 40 years ago are out of step with today. Hard to look back and not be a bit aghast at what was so much more conventional then.”

We worked at home  
and played and

um

raised  
the children.

They **loved** Ken,  
they treated him like

a **FATHER**

from the first days

and that whole issue was totally fine.

Um,

certainly I had some guilt at

s e p a r a t i n g t h e m f r o m t h e i r **FATHER**,

but

**because**

he was never really involved with them anyway,

**that wasn't so bad.**

Um,

he missed me

but (pause)

I was better off

and

I have never really regretted my choice.

( It was **harder**

on Ken  
*because*

he had to **leave**  
**behind**  
two adorable **children**

that

he had been very **close**

with )

# *I remember*

going to an APA meeting



APA meeting, 1926

*and*

starting to .....

*ah* (pause)

**I had a big crying jag in the car,**  
*before*

we got to Toronto

*[or wherever the APA was]*

*because*

*I felt like*

I just have got to *have more* (pause)

**STATUS,**

I have to *have more* have

*more* **INDEPENDENCE,**

*I have to have*

**my own PhD,**

ah,

*more & more* women

*were going on*

*for further*

**E d u c a t i o n**

*and*

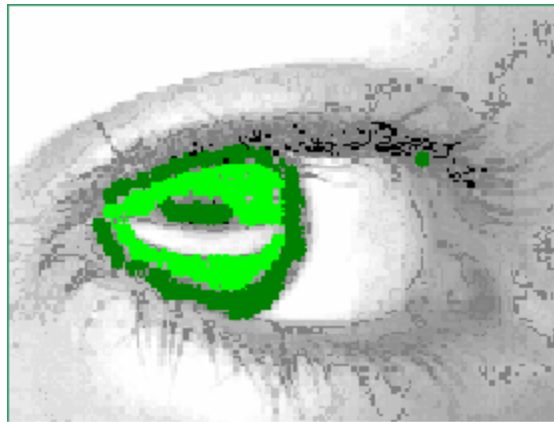
**I saw**

myself

as being

IN A SECONDARY ROLE

**in this no  
where  
land.**



**We** thought that

**I would never**

g r o w into an

**autonomous**

*um,*

kind of

*more* peer

( l o n g p a u s e )

with **HIM**

**u n t i l**

I could establish

**[ s o m e s e p a r a t e g r o u n d ]**

if I saw myself

ah,

d e v e l o p i n g

*it would be like*

first under his wing



*and then*

as **A HELPER**

*and then*

**totally**

**s e p a r a t i n g**

and going off

doing *other things*

*and then*

coming back again.

[ In some sense  
I don't think that  
I'm ever  
gonna  
*um,*  
be his

full equal= ]

for me,  
my work *and*  
what I do *and*  
what I think is

a form of *p l e a s u r e* □

**I do crazy stuff**

*and um*

(in a way)

**EACH**

of

**US**

is  
always

**AMAZING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!** the **OTHER**

*finding* paths,

*finding* relationships,

*finding* ways of learning

that we're *different*

and

*separated,*

but also feeding back ↻

*I love getting  
on airplanes  
with my  
briefcase*



Isadora Duncan

*I am kind of  
an **EXHIBITIONIST**  
and  
I'm very **social**  
and  
**out-going***

when I found my own  
**niche**,  
the **niche** was  
this ➔ **intersection** ← of

*feminist theory* / *and*  
**SOCIAL  
CONSTRUCTIONISM.**



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Uh ,

I s t a r t e d  
p l a y i n g a r o u n d  
w i t h  
w r i t i n g s t y l e s

sort of  
d i s m a n t l i n g  
n a r r a t i v e s

and so  
up  
r/i/p/p/i/n/g the p a p e r s

so that  
there there there there there there there there

were

ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of

ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of

ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of ribbons of

TEXT  
TEXT  
TEXT

different col..., not colours,  
but different

fonts and

lines and \_\_\_\_\_

intersecting other voices,

making my paper p<sup>o</sup>ly-vocaL

and

the voices of the people I was

STUDYING,

the *auto* *biographies* I was  
studying,  
*and*  
*just* being kind of **DARING**  
ABOUT IT.

*Ken spent a long time (one year) ... in Heidelberg, because he had won some fantastic prize and I was sort of on my own there in the Netherlands I couldn't talk to him and so I sat down at the computer and I wrote this performance piece, and I had never done anything like that*

**"Post-modern Mama",**  
*I called the piece.*

I wore a *costume*  
because  
I wanted it to be  
embodied in



*feminism,*

so I wore heels  
and  
a **red** boa





Ken ... he's a real **COMEDIAN**, actually

Comedian Billy Connolly

sometimes  
we sing  
and  
he plays the banjo  
and  
there's no stopping us,  
sort of **craziness** that we can get into,

but *serious* **CR<sup>a</sup>Z<sup>i</sup>neS<sub>s</sub>**

## finding out *new ways* of **livingtogether**

(There's one part of **US**  
that wants to sort of

s i m p l i f y

*and*

s l o w d o w n )

*and*

another part of **US** that  
has these eyes (**I's**) that

***we can hardly resist***

the next thing that's

**GOING ON>>>>>>>>**

**MOVIES... *they were my life.***

I think I may have mentioned that.

Ken and I agree that  
one of the links between us is

***our ways of living out MOVIES in our life...***

**creating sets,**

~~**striking sets,**~~

**acting into a scene...**

our theoretical ideas about *emotional scenarios..*

*seeing ourselves*

as our favorite actors...

**F U N N Y S T U F F L I K E T H A T .**

*" I do think that my greatest personal asset is my optimistic, good feeling flow emotional nature, and I think I am quite protective of it. For example, I have never gone to therapy, nor have ever wished to do so, because I would not want my "gift" to be taken away from me. If I share any bad thoughts or feelings, it is with a couple of close friends, including Ken, who will listen and be consoling, but not be too invasive. I always know that no matter how down I might be it will soon pass... and so it is only necessary to wait for morning... "*

*Its probably all related to the MOVIES ...*  
**LOVE, AFFAIRS, SEX, BETRAYAL...**  
*and finally,*  
*because we grew up in the 50's...*  
**HAPPY ENDINGS.**

### Lyrics to "Happy Trails" by Dale Evans Rogers

Happy trails to you, until we meet again.  
Happy trails to you, keep smilin' until then.  
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?  
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.  
Happy trails to you, 'till we meet again.

Some trails are happy ones,  
Others are blue.  
It's the way you ride the trail that counts,  
Here's a happy one for you.

Happy trails to you, until we meet again.  
Happy trails to you, keep smilin' until then.  
Who cares about the clouds when we're together?  
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.

Happy trails to you, 'till we meet again.



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## Full Interview

The full interview and follow-up questions and their responses are available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18b-e.htm>. A list of Mary GERGEN's academic achievements can be seen at: <http://mary.gergen.socialpsychology.org/>.

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Kip JONES is an ESRC Research Fellow at De Montfort University in the UK. His work includes developing qualitative approaches to systematic evidence review, including using meta-ethnography and narrative techniques to "synthesise" qualitative research. He is Associate Book Review Editor of the online journal *FQS* (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>). He has written on and given workshops in narrative biographic interpretive method. His chapter, "Minimalist Passive Interviewing Technique and Team Analysis of Narrative Qualitative Data" in *New Qualitative Methodologies in Health and Social Care*, F. RAPPORT, (Ed.) was published by Routledge in 2004. He continues to explore ways to incorporate methods from the arts and humanities in the presentation of social science data.

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## Citation

Please cite this article as follows (and include paragraph numbers if necessary):

Jones, Kip (2004, September). "*Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary*" [A Biographic Narrative Interview With Mary Gergen]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [Online Journal], 5(3), Art. 18. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18-e.htm> [Date of access: Month Day, Year].