Hi, I'm Steven Rowley, author of *The Editor*, now out in paperback from Putnam Books. *The Editor* is the story of a young writer, James Smale, in 1990s New York, who gets his big break when a publishing house is interested in his deeply autobiographical manuscript about his mother. He's shocked to learn that the editor who is interested is perhaps the most famous editor in America—in fact, one of the most famous women in America, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

For those who don’t remember, Jackie Onassis had a fifteen year career in book publishing after the death of her second husband. This is one of the least explored times but perhaps one of the most interesting times in her life. It was a real treat to research and get to know about Jackie Onassis the working woman, and this really profound career she had editing almost a hundred titles in book publishing.

I’d like to share with you an excerpt from the book. This is just after James meets with Jackie for the very first time and leaves her office stunned about what just happened.

I manage to stay collected until I reach the bank of elevators, even though I can feel everyone’s eyes on me as I walk down the hall, back through the paper and push-pins and cubicles and past the framed book covers; I trip and pause only when it hits me that my cover will perhaps one day be among them. Miraculously, I get an elevator to myself for four floors, leaving just enough time for me to self-defibrillate before the doors reopen and three chatty coworkers enter the elevator and join me for the rest of the ride to the lobby, complaining the whole way about a new brand of powdered coffee creamer that leaves a residue in their mugs. I wonder if they have any idea what just happened. I’m curious if they can glimpse my secret, if they can smell it on me, my own residue, and the coffee-creamier conversation is a cover. I try to smell myself, to see if there is some trace of Jackie’s perfume, or, better yet, some faint whiff of American decorative arts from her White House restoration, leather or oils or fine upholstery. It occurs to me they think I’m crazy, a man in a corner with a stunned expression, smelling himself for any trace of 1962.

Does Jackie drink office coffee with powdered creamer out of a foam cup—does she like it, or just choke it down to fit in? Does she talk about her weekend in dreamy terms (“How was your weekend, Mrs. Onassis?”; “Fine, I reframed the Chagall and then got some sun in Belize”)? Or is she just one of us, stretching her lunch breaks when spring is in the air, stealing uni-ball pens from the supply closet to use at home.

When the elevator reaches the ground floor I let the others off first, then push through the lobby and revolving door, almost forgetting to exit on 52nd Street. The sharp February air
enters my lungs and jolts me like a shot of ice-cold vodka. I line up in front of the first hot
dog vendor I come to, even though I don’t eat hot dogs; when I get to the front of the line
I pretend not to have my wallet and continue toward Times Square as I start to replay
what just happened.

I lied to Jackie in our meeting, about how I came to write about my mother. Because it
was a choice, even if I said it was desperation. We were once close—very close—and
slowly as I grew older we were not. She blames me for the end of her marriage, for my
father. She never said so explicitly, but honestly how could she not? My father was a
difficult man, older, not just from another generation but from another time. He never knew
what to make of me. He certainly didn’t approve of me, my sensitive nature, my creative
ambitions, my wanting to live in the city, my insistence on being myself. He called me
foppish once, and I think we both knew it was a placeholder for another derogatory f-
word. My mother spent a lot of time running interference. I think she thought she was
doing what was best—shielding me from him—but it cost my father and I any chance at
a real relationship and she paid a price for it too.

After they divorced, my mother withdrew and she became a mystery for me to unravel. A
more patient son might have waited for this to self-correct. I could have led by example
as I grew into the man I was meant to be, been a beacon for truth that somehow lit the
way. But the more closed off she became, the louder the invitation was to unscramble
her; I would pursue, she would retreat—it became an endless, vicious loop. Eventually I
chose fiction as a way toward fact. It was inevitable that she would become my subject.

“I’m writing a book about Mom,” I remember telling my sister, Naomi, when I completed a
particularly inspiring writing intensive. It was a three-day workshop and I came out feeling
the time for a novel was now.

“Oh, God. Why?” was her response.

It was so obvious to me. “Have you met her? C’mon. Why not.”

I thought I could show my mother how much I understood her, how grateful, in fact, I was
for everything she had sacrificed for me. My brother Kenny told me there were certain
questions about Mom that were just going to remain unanswered, and the sooner I
accepted that, the happier I would be. He was able to make peace with it. Naomi was
able to go about her life just fine. But a child wants to be close to his mother, and I was
forever the baby. I think Kenny and Naomi felt that by not kicking the hornet’s nest, they
would be just close enough. Not so for me.

Did I say any of this to Jackie? No, because I lied and said it was desperation. Although,
wasn’t it? Just not desperation for a subject, desperation for something else. Reconciliation. Repatriation. Damn. Why wasn’t I better prepared for this meeting?

I turn around to see a black man dressed in drag as the Statue of Liberty approach, torch
in the air and all. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, honey,” he says.

I smile and think of the last line of the poem, which has stuck since I learned it in Mrs.
Chaddon’s sixth-grade class. “I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

“That’s right you do, baby,” he says, before disappearing into a tour group wearing green foam Statue of Liberty visors exiting a Sbarro.

A bus stops at the red light in front of me with the high-pitched squealing of poorly maintained brakes. I glance up at the people on board before noticing that the bus sports a tattered poster for Oliver Stone’s JFK, released in theaters this past Christmas. The poster is faded and torn, as if some drunk NYU student tried to pry it off for his dorm room wall and abandoned the theft halfway through.

I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. I just met a woman in a conference room who is also somehow everywhere, even in the image of a tattered American flag draped over Kevin Costner’s face on the side of this bus.

It’s impossible to reconcile.

Across Seventh Avenue, I spot a mother holding her child’s hand. Her eyes dart from one potential danger to another, and she places her other hand on the boy’s shoulder so as not to lose him—that single touch a time machine for me. My first ever visit to this neon circus, I think I was seven. My parents decided to drive us into the city from our sleepy upstate home so we could feel the energy, walking us all the way up Fifth Avenue from the Empire State Building to Central Park. On the way back to the car, my father charged forward, insisting that Times Square was a sight everyone should see. Kenny and Naomi were teenagers, able to withstand the bustle of the city and seemingly unfazed by it all. But my mother held me so tightly, at times I thought I might bruise.

“Keep up, Aileen. The boy’s fine,” my father bellowed. And then, “What we should really do is see the subway. A marvel of urban transportation.” Those were the things that interested my father, tunnels and bridges and trains.

But I didn’t want to go underground, like rats—I could barely breathe above; I looked desperately for patches of sky. I glanced to my mother for help, prayed she would never let go, and she leaned down and whispered in my ear the words that would one day change my life: “You know, all the great writers live in New York.”

[Author speaking]

And that is The Editor, now out in paperback. I hope you pick up a copy to learn more about James’s and Jacqueline Onassis’s truly fascinating career in publishing. Thank you.