Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

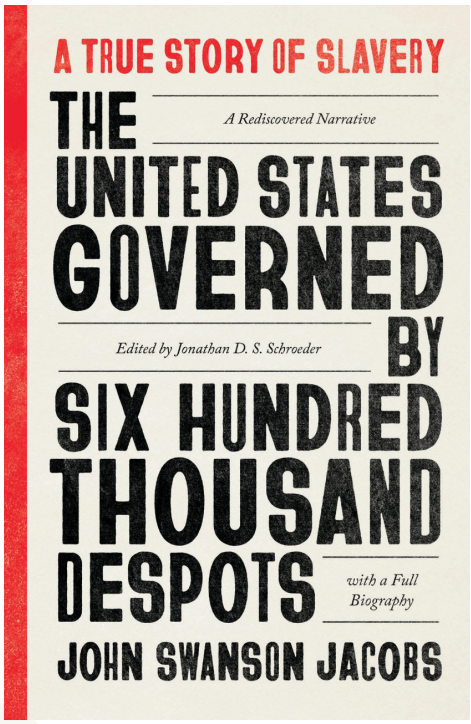
*Presented by the Cleveland Foundation

90 YEARS

CLASS OF 2025 BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots

by Jonathan D.S. Schroeder



NONFICTION

1. In 1855, John Swanson Jacobs walked into the office of an Australian newspaper declaring himself a capital F, capital S "Fugitive Slave." He demanded his story be told without alteration.

   As literary scholar Jonathan D. S. Schroeder explains, Jacobs' rediscovered narrative defies the conventions of the slave narrative genre. Rather than appealing to the sensibilities of white abolitionists by detailing and documenting the horrors of slavery, Jacobs boldly critiqued the U.S. Constitution and indicted everyday citizens for their complicity in slavery.

   When reading the text, can you find contemporary relevancy with Jacobs' critiques? How has the U.S. government evolved to uphold its principles of freedom? In this contemporary moment, what is at stake?

   Have you ever tried to share your story but felt filtered or pressured to tell it in a certain way? Are there spaces in your life where you feel free to tell the full truth? What would it look like to be more unapologetic in your approach to storytelling? What would it look like to create more space for people to tell the full truth? To critique while also looking to create?

2. The second Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it legal to capture and return escaped enslaved people—even from free states. In the face of this act, Jacobs fled to the sea, denouncing the possibility of change inside of the U.S. and instead choosing to become a citizen of the world. How do the limits of freedom in America at that time still echo today in conversations about migration, citizenship, safety and freedom?

3. As Schroeder writes in the introduction, "this is the only known slave narrative written by revolutionary Black sailor. It is likewise the only known slave narrative printed outside the abolitionist network that linked the United States, Canada and Great Britain." Jacobs wrote this slave narrative far from American soil, while stationed at sea in Australia. How does this distance from the epicenter of slavery allow room for Jacobs to see contradictions? What new insights do we gain by seeing Black activism as deeply American while also being globally rooted?