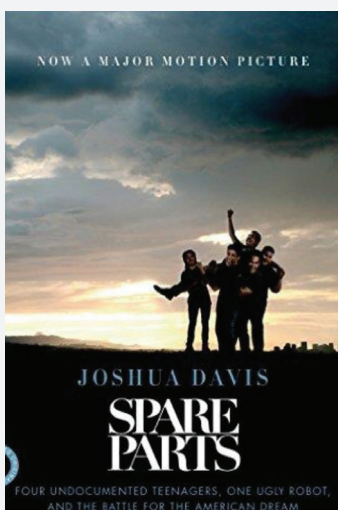


## First Opinion: Negotiating Risk and Reward in Davis's *Spare Parts*

Davis, Joshua. *Spare Parts: Four Undocumented Teenagers, One Ugly Robot, and the Battle for the American Dream*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014. Print.

*Myra Infante Sheridan*



In *Spare Parts*, Joshua Davis contextualizes issues surrounding immigration in the United States by introducing us to a high school robotics team that triumphs in the face of adversity. This nonfiction account includes the stories of the teachers, students, families, and community members involved in an extraordinary David versus Goliath account.

The book opens with the robotics team standing before a panel of judges from top governmental and industrial engineering agencies. The reader briefly witnesses the extraordinary competence of the high school team as they explain the science behind their robot. As Davis describes their appearance and the reaction of the judges, one thing becomes obvious: this group of Mexican, undocumented high school students are not your run-of-the-mill robotics team.

The book is divided into three parts. During the first third of the book, the story focuses on the lives of four students, two teachers, and one national underwater robotics competition. The four students were all born in Mexico and were brought into the United States without documentation by their parents. It should be noted that Davis uses the term “illegally” at times, which may make some readers uncomfortable. However, one can assume that he did so with the permission of the families involved, as he mentions that he consulted with them extensively while writing an article for *Wired* and subsequently this book. Throughout the

book, the theme of risk versus reward appears when addressing the undocumented status of the students. We catch glimpses of the students' lives in Mexico, and the reasons (always for a shot at a better life) their parents brought them to the United States. At times the atmosphere in the story suggests a "What do we have to lose?" attitude, but it quickly changes to, "Oh, wait. We could lose everything."

Each student in *Square Parts* brought a unique strength to the team: scientific knowledge, crazy ideas, physical stamina, leadership, and so forth. Individually, they struggled to fit in with a new culture and language. Together they became the winning robotics team from Carl Hayden Community High School in Phoenix, Arizona. Their two teachers were also misfits, in their own right. The robotics teacher was an Iranian immigrant who had disappointed his family when he refused to become a doctor. The computer programming teacher was a self-described quasi hippie.

The second part of the book depicts the students' journey in learning to build the underwater robot. Their mantra during this phase was, "As long as we don't place last." They decided that if they were doomed to lose, at least they should lose to a worthy opponent. Hence, they signed up to compete against university teams rather than high school teams. In a constructivist approach, they learned the science by solving problems that arose during robot construction. They found that the best way to get answers was to phone expert sales people of the components they needed. Their earnest requests were often met with donations or discounts.

What readers will appreciate is how Davis positions the struggles of the robotics team within the bigger struggle of undocumented students in the United States. Davis provides historical context for the political scene in Arizona, which included legislation that empowered law enforcement to detain anyone who looked or smelled like an "illegal." High school students could be and were deported while on school trips. The students, teachers, and families had to decide whether the promise of a better future justified the risks they took in participating in school competitions.

The third part of the book narrates the national competition, and Davis takes the reader on a roller coaster of emotions as the team faces last minute challenges. But, unlike the motion picture now available, the book does not end at the climactic announcement of the winners of the competition. Instead, Davis gives the reader a sobering view of the current lives of the robotic team winners. Because of their undocumented status, two of the four high school students found it difficult to complete university degrees. One student completed an associate degree in culinary arts. The fourth student completed a degree in mechanical engineering and was recognized by President Obama during graduation; nevertheless, this student still had to return to Mexico for some time and work low-paying jobs while others advocated for his permanent residency. Davis juxtaposes all of these struggles with the considerable success, after college, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) students who lost to the undocumented high school students.

With the current call by educational reformists for more nonfiction texts in the classroom, *Spare Parts* provides multiple opportunities for English teachers to engage students in discussions about immigration, science, and the American Dream.

### **About the Author**

**Myra Infante Sheridan** is a graduate student in the literacy education PhD program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She received her MFA in creative writing from The University of Texas Pan American in 2011. Her book *Combustible Sinners and Other Stories* was published in 2012. Before moving to Las Vegas, Sheridan taught high school English in South Texas and was a lecturer at The University of Texas Pan American, where she participated extensively in the study abroad program.