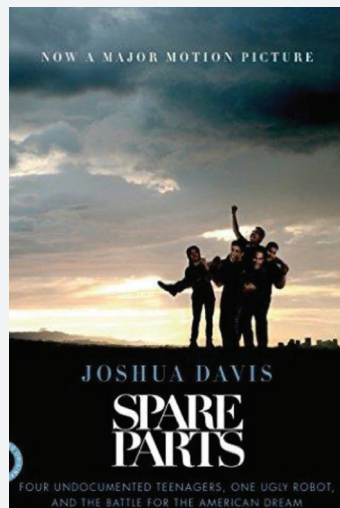


Second Reaction: Spare Thoughts on *Spare Parts*

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.

Matthew LaVergne



On my mantelpiece there is a novelty trophy that is shaped remarkably like an Academy Award. The legend of the statuette reads, “To Matt LaVergne, for Best Set Construction with the Use of Cardboard.” I was given this memento for designing and building a set for the play *Picnic*; the director required two housefronts built with an eighth of a shoestring budget on a stage the size of a postage stamp. That was over a decade ago. Recently, I’ve been spending the last two months pulling off a similar minor miracle. I mention these set building activities by way of demonstrating that I can appreciate the ingenuity and problem-solving skills of the robotics team in *Spare Parts*: to be reminded that the solution to any problem should, above all, be more functional than baroque.

Joshua Davis’s account of the Carl Hayden High School robotics team and their participation in the 2004 Marine Advanced Technology Education competition was challenging for me as a reader and a teacher. I wanted to enjoy this book—the subject matter interests me as a hobbyist builder—but the structure at times made it difficult. On the one hand, Davis keeps the narrative flowing with remarkable speed. On the other hand, he spends the first section of the book frenetically jumping from team member to team member, which feels rushed and disorienting. In fact, it was so disorienting that I put the book down for several weeks before coming back to it. As a reader, I was given the impression that the title, *Spare Parts*, referred to more than just

the materials used to build the competition robot. Each member of the team, from the students to the advisors, came to his role in the story in an unorthodox and compelling method.

Once Davis establishes the individual personalities and challenges of the robotics team and their teacher advisors, the story becomes focused and easier to read. For the majority of the remainder of the book, Davis tells the story of building the team, building the robot, and the competition. To his credit, he never bogs the reader down with the details of robotics or the mechanics of the challenges involved in achieving the goals of the competition. Readers do, however, see how these teens face particular problems and challenges in novel ways. This feels like the real value of the book: an overall emphasis on solving problems in the face of adversity. The use and acquisition of tampons to solve a moisture problem is especially enjoyable (160–161). From scrounging for materials, and financing their dream, to dealing with the fact that several of the team members were in the country illegally, these young men found ways to address their problems.

Because of my personal difficulty getting into the book, I would be reluctant to use it in a unit in my classroom. I can see that the book would provide interesting discussions about problem-solving, immigration, and class/status. Still, I know that the majority of my students would have similar difficulties to my own in finding traction with the start of the text. Yearly, we struggle with the beginning sections of both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Things Fall Apart*. Typically, my students are impatient to get into the events of the plot. They are not experienced enough to appreciate the lengthy setup.

As reticent as I am to use the book as part of a unit, I will buy several copies to keep in the classroom library. I always have makers and tinkerers in the room, who would appreciate the efforts and struggles of the young men that Davis chronicles in *Spare Parts*.

About the Author

Matthew LaVergne teaches English to ninth grade students at the Louisiana State University Laboratory School. When he isn't teaching, he spends most of his free time tinkering, building, or knitting.