**Cliff Notes Finally Gain Respectability**

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Under no circumstances would students let their teachers know they had them. They hid them and used them on the sly.

Not anymore. Cliffs Notes, those distinctive black and yellow study guides - some call ``crib sheets`` - to the classics have come out from behind the notebooks.

``(Some) teachers use them themselves,`` said John Maxwell, executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English, which has 100,000 members. ``They have a good reputation among most teachers. ... Resistance has faded to the extent that you hear teachers refer youngsters to Cliffs Notes on occasion.``

That pleases Cliff Hillegass, the Cliff in Cliffs Notes.

He started the company 26 years ago in his basement with $4,000 borrowed from a bank, his first wife as his staff and an idea given to him by a successful Canadian bookseller who was publishing a set of notes on Shakespeare`s plays in Canada.

Hillegass, who bought and sold used college textbooks, thought American students could use the same kind of help, and the rest is publishing history.

He sold all 18,000 copies he had printed of 16 of Shakespeare`s plays in the first six months, and the company has done nothing but grow since. There are about 60 million Cliffs Notes of 225 books in circulation.

They`re sold everywhere from Harvard University and neighborhood bookstores to 39 foreign countries, where they sometimes have a dual purpose. In China, company president Dick Spellman explained, the notes help university students to understand modern American English.

Sales are booming, hitting $8 million this last year and with record increases each of the past three years, Spellman said.

``They were always legitimate,`` said Hillegrass, who is 68, serves as chairman of the board of the privately held company and still works full time. ``The difference is now they`re recognized as being a legitimate study aid.``

The notes give students a plot synopsis as well as criticism, character analysis and a brief biography of the author. They set the book or play in some historical context and even offer sample essay questions at the end.

Students can use Cliffs Notes to study everything from Shakespeare`s plays and sonnets to The Scarlet Letter and Catcher in the Rye. This year, John Irving`s The World According to Garp and Alice Walker`s The Color Purple are among the titles being added.

The staff knows how capricious the market can be. In the 1970s, for example, sales dropped as student rebellion discouraged the teaching classics and pass-fail grades were widely used. Now sales are soaring as schools have returned to a more traditional curriculum and students have become much more grade conscious, company officials believe.

In addition, ``today`s teachers are yesterday`s users,`` Spellman explained. ``They know how to use them, and there isn`t anything in them that isn`t in other reference materials in the library.``

``It is considered one more resource for youngsters to use as they are groping toward some understanding,`` agreed Maxwell. ``My view is that it`s healthy. There are lots of critical studies that young people can refer to, and Cliffs Notes is one.``

The small, 25-person staff, which works out of a cheery office in Lincoln, Neb., is constantly revising some titles, dropping others and deciding which new ones to add.

The company also has begun to produce taped cassettes of some classics, test preparation guides, foreign language guides and even humor and cookbooks. But the literature study guides remain the backbone of the business.

http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1986-01-18/features/8601040689\_1\_cliff-hillegass-cliffs-notes-sample-essay-questions