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In other words, Cliffs Notes is a classic success

By WILLIAM P. BARRETT

Staff Writer

LINCOLN, Neb. — In the history of business endeavor they occupy an honored place, the persons of whom it truly may be said: They developed an industry.

Daring souls, like Elisha Otis and his elevators or Linus Yale Jr. and his cylinder locks. Visionaries not satisfied with the status quo, like Jacob Schick and his electric razors or Willis Carrier and his air conditioners.

Entrepreneurs of action, with the courage to implement their convictions. Pathfinders whose very names are synonymous with the products they improved. Giants who literally are themselves the industry.

People like Clifton K. Hillegass and his Cliffs Notes.

Hillegass didn't invent the literary book summary, which also is known, particularly by irate literature teachers and some grateful students, as a crib sheet.

But he surely pushed it to a new level. This year, more than 4 million of his distinctive yellow-and-black-covered booklets, neatly condensing and compacting more than 225 works of literature, will be sold. That's a record.

Rival companies acknowledge ruefully that Cliffs Notes Inc., of which Hillegass is founder, chairman and chief executive officer, now has a staggering 80 percent of the market, a level of market penetration much higher, for example, than the computer business of IBM.

Cliffs Notes strategists feel the future is even rosier. Hillegass and his staff are counting on big boosts from the "back to basics" craze sweeping the nation's school systems, the renewed emphasis in col-

leges on letter grades over pass-fail, and most especially, the entry into high schools later this decade of children of baby-boom era children.

"It's looking pretty good," says Richard Spellman, Cliffs Notes Inc. president. Annual sales are topping \$9 million. Perhaps more than one-third of that is pure profit for Hillegass, who no longer runs the day-to-day operations and likes long vacations.

In addition to its summaries of books, the company sells its own series of test preparation guides; five volumes of the "Texas Dictionary," a humorous, illustrated look at Lone Star "English," and a new line of cassette tapes that dramatize certain classics — presumably for people who find even Cliffs Notes too tedious.

Growth will not be without struggle, though, for the literary book note battle is heating up. Two months ago Barron's Educational Services Inc., makers of standardized test-preparation guides, unveiled a new line of summaries that it is marketing nationally. Monarch Notes, published by the Simon & Schuster division of Gulf and Western Corp. and for many years Cliffs Notes' principal competitor, is launching a series of — believe it or not

Literature that isn't by the book

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— James Barcus, Baylor University

— simplified summaries, aimed at the lucrative high school market.

Still, after 26 years of business, Hillegass' niche as The Grand Old Man of Book Notes is secure. The 66-year-old publisher, a lanky, balding native Nebraska with a gentle demeanor and the unmistakable look of a winner, relishes his past and his future. "I always tend to be optimistic," he says.

To many college English professors, though, Cliffs Notes is an instrument of the devil worthy of inclusion in Paradise

Lost. They assume that some users don't read the underlying novels and answer essay questions using Cliffs-given themes.

"Cliffs Notes encourage the Great American Fault that there is a quick and easy way to do everything," grouses James Barcus, chairman of the English Department of Baylor University in Waco. "It encourages people to take shortcuts. I wish the students would ask themselves what they are doing."

Says Gerald Gillespie, professor of comparative literature at Stanford University: "The people at Cliffs Notes have a very high vision of themselves, much like TV newscasters, that they are great purveyors of information. They are just intellectual masturbators."

Because of sentiments like this, those associated with Cliffs Notes tend to be a little touchy, but they adamantly defend their product. "It's not intended as a substitute for reading the book, but as a way of refreshing the memory and providing new insights," says Gary Carey, the editor of Cliffs Notes. He says book notes are

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Despite their success, some critics throw the book at Cliffs Notes

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no different than an electronic calculator in a science class.

The inside front cover of all Cliffs Notes contains a lengthy "note to the reader" declaring that students who don't read the text itself "are denying themselves the very education that they are presumably giving their most vital years to achieve."

That there is some sort of stigma attached to the product is undeniable. Spelling, the president, says there are "a few" college bookstores that refuse to handle Cliffs Notes on ethical grounds.

In fact, the Southern Methodist University bookstore in Dallas expects to stop selling Cliffs Notes by the end of the year, although Phylis Bunn, reference/technical book manager, says the reason is strictly economic. "We don't think they carry their weight on the floor," she says.

On the other hand, the bookstore at Baylor University, employer of the disapproving Professor Barcus, says it can't get enough Cliffs Notes. Agnes Goodwin, the trade book manager, adds approvingly that the store stocks virtually all 205 titles.

Some of the writers who author individual Cliffs Notes say they are proud of their work — but won't list it on their resumes.

Cliffs Notes are pithy. They squeeze a novel into anywhere from one-seventh to one-half its normal length. Most of the titles can be read in less than an hour.

Of course, sometimes it's overdone. The famous opening passage of "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens — "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . ." — is summarized this way by Cliffs Notes:

"In 1775 people viewed their era as exceptionally good or exceptionally wicked . . ."

Some of this may be attributable to a copyright infringement suit that Random House brought against Cliffs Notes in the 1960s. The litigation was settled out of

court when Hillegass agreed to cut down on verbatim quotations.

In retrospect that lawsuit proved to be a positive watershed for Cliffs Notes. Previously little more than plot summaries, new editions stressed interpretation, analysis, criticism — along with the "suggested examination questions" and possible answers — to the point where in many titles the outline of the plot is less than half the volume. "We're much better for it," Spellman says. Many critics agree.

It is an article of faith around the Cliffs Notes building, a former tombstone factory in downtown Lincoln, that the summaries reflect the mainstream of literary interpretation.

All the titles are done by outside writers. (Hillegass himself has never written a single note.) Carey, the Cliffs Notes editor and himself the author of a dozen summaries, says he tries to match up scholar with work.

"If it's a black author, we try to find a black writer," he says. "If it's a work by a woman, we try to find a woman." Of the 250-odd writers who have worked for Cliffs Notes, one, the late John Gardner, achieved considerable fame as an author in his own right.

Like the books he summarizes, Hillegass has boiled down his company to the essentials and it has made him a millionaire. With the writing and the printing farmed out, Cliffs Notes Inc. has only 30 employees. Half salespeople in the field and stock clerks in the warehouse who provide what is widely regarded in the publishing industry as outstanding customer service.

The salespeople also monitor college and high school reading lists, and Cliffs Notes is quick to respond to the changing market. Each year about 10 new works are added, 10 are updated and one or two dropped. Some recent titles are not strictly classics, such as "Catch-22" by Joseph Heller, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," by Ken Kesey, and "Autobiography of Mal-

This year, the No. 1 seller is "The Scarlet Letter," by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Shakespeare is always close behind. Of late the author with the sharpest decline in popularity, as measured by Cliffs Notes sales, is Joseph Conrad. Several of his titles have been dropped.

The outside writers grumble about the low pay and the fact that Hillegass makes them sign away all rights to royalties. Carl Senna, a lecturer at Northeastern University in Boston, says he was paid "less than \$3,000" to write the 64-page Cliffs Note on "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll. "It's not great money, but I needed the cash," he says, adding that he doesn't mind listing it on a resume.

The big story at Cliffs Notes, though, is Cliff himself. While hardly the stuff of great books, it is a classic free-enterprise success tale.

A native of Rising City, Neb., Hillegass attended Midland College in nearby Fremont, Neb., graduating in 1937 with a Bachelor of Science degree and what he says was "a deep interest in books." After World War II he became the manager of the wholesale division of Nebraska Book Co., which despite its name was a nationwide wholesaler of college textbooks. In that position he knew hundreds of college bookstore managers on a first-name basis.

Plot summaries were being sold in the United States, although not on a nationwide basis. In 1958 a Canadian publisher and friend, Jack Cole, asked if Hillegass wanted the U.S. rights to Cole's plot summaries of 16 Shakespearean works. Hillegass set up shop in the basement of his home.

"I needed a name for the set, of course," Hillegass says. "One day we were kicking around possible names, some of them pretty silly. Eliot Leonard, manager of the book co-op at Harvard, said to me, 'We're being ridiculous. All the bookstore managers know you as Cliff. Call them Cliffs Notes.'"