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String theory_the hot topic in physics for the past 20 years_is a dead-end, says Smolin, one of the founders of Canada's Perimeter Institute of Theoretical Physics and himself a lapsed string theorist. In fact, he (and others) argue convincingly, string theory isn't even a fully formed theory_it's just a "conjecture." As Smolin reminds his readers, string theorists haven't been able to prove any of their exotic ideas, and he says there isn't much chance that they will in the foreseeable future. The discovery of "dark energy," which seems to be pushing the universe apart faster and faster, isn't explained by string theory and is proving troublesome for that theory's advocates. Smolin (The Life of the Cosmos) believes that physicists are making the mistake of searching for a theory that is "beautiful" and "elegant" instead of one that's actually backed up by experiments. He encourages physicists to investigate new alternatives and highlights several young physicists whose work he finds promising.