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**Autor:** Hawking, Stephen W.

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**Sinopsis**

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Put Stephen Hawking, Kip Thorne, Igor Novikov, Timothy Ferris and Alan Lightman in a room together, and I would imagine that the intellectual sparks would fly lively and thick. The five essays collected in this book are adapted from those sparks, talks given at the California Institute of Technology in June 2000 to honor the 60th birthday of physicist Kip Thorne. If there is a unifying theme to the essays, it is the possibility of time travel, one of Thorne's obsessions as a theoretician of general relativity and, of course, a topic of perennial popular interest. None of the authors was paid for his contribution, and royalties will go to a Caltech scholarship fund in Thorne's name. Theoretical physicist Igor Novikov starts by asking, "Can we change the past?" He shows how curious foldings and warpings of spacetime apparently allow the possibility of traveling back in time and considers the so-called grandfather paradox: What if I travel back in time and kill my grandfather? Then, logically, I would never have been born to make my journey into the past. Novikov argues that the laws of nature would prevent such logical paradoxes from happening. Stephen Hawking is perhaps the world's most famous theorist of spacetime. He is less sanguine than Novikov that time travel is possible, except on the scale of individual atomic particles, which is not of much use for science-fiction fantasies. If Hawking's take on the physics is correct, grandfather is doubly safe. Thorne uses his commanding presence at the heart of the book to address the question implicit in the title: How will our understanding of spacetime evolve in the near future, theoretically and experimentally? The final two essays, by writers Timothy Ferris and Alan Lightman, though excellent in themselves, have nothing directly to do with the topic at hand. Ferris considers how science is communicated to the general public, and Lightman muses on relations between science and art. It all adds up to less than the sum of its parts. The word "hodgepodge" comes to mind, and the fact that the editors decided the book needed a long preparatory introduction (longer than all but one of the five contributions) and a puffed-up glossary suggests that the problems were apparent from the beginning. Anyone who wants the skinny on time travel and the future of spacetime would do well to go directly to Thorne's excellent popular book *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* (W. W. Norton, 1994). Still, there is a terrific story lurking among the disparate parts of the present volume, but readers will have to dig it out for themselves.