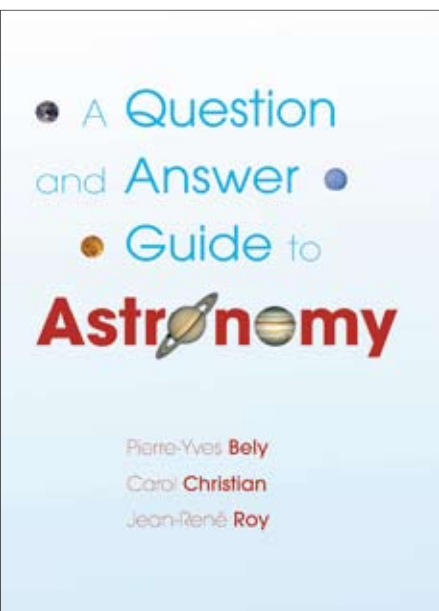


# A Question and Answer Guide to Astronomy

By Pierre-Yves Bely, Carol Christian and Jean-René Roy

Are we alone in the Universe? Was there anything before the Big Bang? Are there other universes? What are sunspots? What is a shooting star? Was there ever life on Mars? This book answers the fascinating questions that we have been asking ourselves for hundreds of years. Using **non-technical language**, the authors summarize current astronomical knowledge, taking care to include the important underlying scientific principles. **Plentiful color illustrations, graphs and photographs** lend further weight to their **simple yet meticulously written explanations**. Dip in to discover and learn fascinating facts about our Solar System and the Universe beyond!



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## CONTENTS:

Stars  
The Solar System  
The Earth  
The Moon  
Celestial phenomena

The Universe  
Life in the Universe  
History of astronomy  
Telescopes  
Amateur astronomy

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## How big are the stars?

Stars come in a great range of sizes. The smallest ones, neutron stars, are only a few tens of kilometers in diameter, while the largest supergiants have diameters hundreds of millions of kilometers across, 1 000 times the diameter of the Sun. If we exclude these exceptional cases and just consider normal stars in the main sequence, we find that they have diameters of between 1/10th and 10 times the diameter of the Sun.

## Do stars really come in different colors?

Yes, for people with very good eyes. Betelgeuse, in the constellation of Orion, is red. Rigel, in the same constellation, is blue, as are Sirius and Vega. The Sun itself is white, a neutral color – although, when close to the horizon, it appears yellow due to atmospheric absorption. The eye loses its sensitivity to color in low light – at night, for example – so that faint bright stars appear white to us, but in reality they are colored.

Extracts from the chapter "Stars", pp 11&14

### Stars

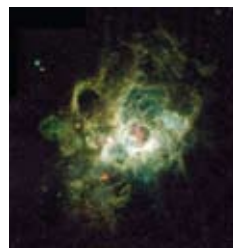
#### 1 Why do stars shine?

Just as a piece of iron glows red or white hot when heated in a forge, stars shine because they are hot, very hot: millions of degrees at the core and thousands of degrees at the surface. Early on, this was thought to be the result of combustion, that the stars were burning in the same way that coal burns, but if that were the case, they would have lifetimes of only a few thousand years, whereas most stars live for billions of years.

The formidable amount of energy necessary for such long lifetimes comes from two sources: gravity while the star is forming, then nuclear fusion during the rest of its life.

Stars are formed from interstellar clouds of dust and gases, mostly hydrogen, that become progressively concentrated. In the first stage of a star's life, the force of gravity pulls the cloud into a spherical shape (Q. 3). This contraction – think of it as a falling inward – releases energy, just as an object falling on our foot transmits energy to us that we perceive as pain and bruising. As the gas and dust heat up, they start to glow, emitting light weakly in the infrared. Eventually, as the temperature of the gas continues to rise, it begins emitting visible light. The cloud has now become a young star.

As the interior of the collapsing sphere grows hotter and denser, the gas molecules break up into atoms, then the atoms lose their electrons and become ions. At that point the gas has become an electrically charged hot plasma composed of an equal number of freely moving, positively charged ions and negatively charged electrons. Finally, the core of the sphere becomes so dense and hot (15 million K) that the hydrogen nuclei begin to collide and fuse into helium.



Stars being formed inside a cloud of gas and dust (NGC 604). Each red dot is a new star – about 200 are visible. Their light, rich in ultraviolet radiation, excites the atoms in the cloud of gas, making it glow. Credit: NASA/ESA.

### The Universe

#### 127 How old is the Universe?

Living things obviously have finite lifetimes: they are born, live, and die. Also, we know now that planets, stars, and galaxies have finite lifetimes. The idea that the Universe had a beginning, is evolving, and may eventually come to an end is a relatively recent and quite revolutionary idea (Q. 81). The ancient Greek philosophers and most great mythologies postulated a Universe with no beginning – immutable and eternal. Even Newton, Einstein, and the astronomer Edwin Hubble, whose works underpin our current understanding of the history of the Universe, found it hard to accept the concept of cosmic evolution.

However there is no longer any doubt that the Universe "began" 13.7 billion years ago (Q. 128). How is it possible that such a number can be determined with such astonishing precision? Four different methods were used and the results of all of them are consistent.

The first method consists of calculating the age of the oldest known stars which are found in the globular clusters of our galaxy's halo. Since nuclear energy is what makes stars shine, we can determine the age of a star by measuring how much of its nuclear fuel has been used up. The oldest stars are between 8 and 13 billion years old as determined by comparison of observational data with theory. So the Universe is at least that old, and very likely a bit older if we take into account the time needed for conditions in the early Universe to become favorable for the birth of the first stars.

The second method consists of estimating the age of the oldest atoms. Radioactive elements such as uranium-235 and -238, thorium-232, and potassium-40 are unstable and disintegrate over time, and their degree of disintegration is a measure of their lifetimes. The oldest such atoms found on Earth or in meteorites are about 10 billion years old. These atoms are much heavier than hydrogen and could only have been created long after the birth of the Universe (Q. 16). Therefore, the age of the Universe must be greater than the age of the atoms in it, and so older than 10 billion years.



The Earth–Moon couple, like all objects in our solar system, is quite old: about 4.5 billion years – one third the age of the Universe. This magnificent photo of our small world was taken by the space probe Galileo on its way to Jupiter in 1990. Credit: NASA.

Sample pages

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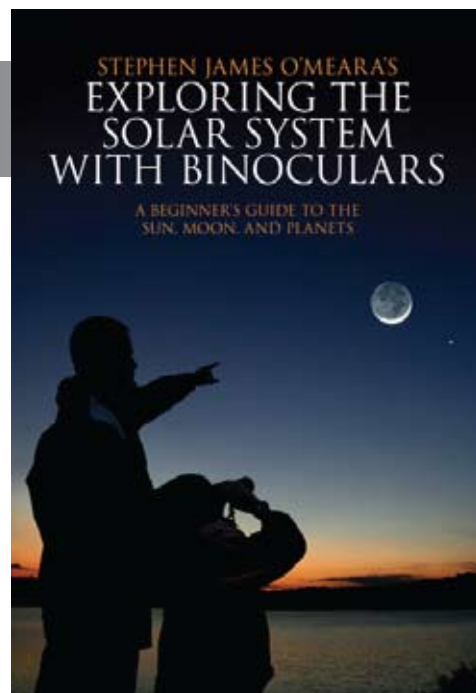
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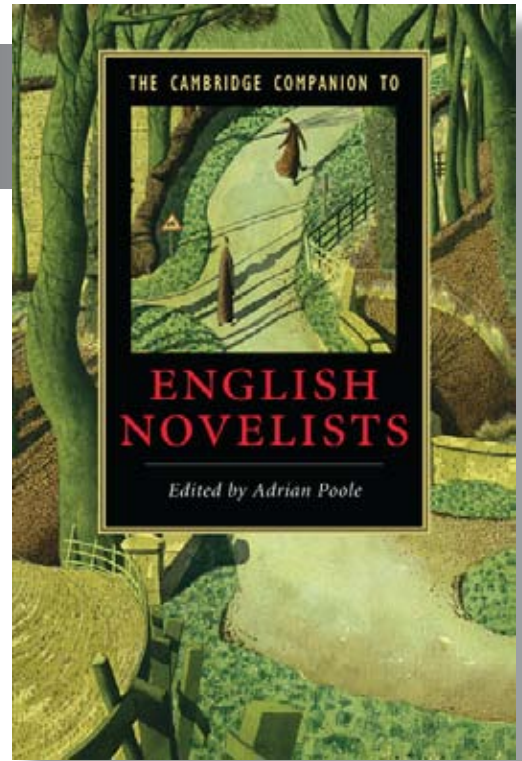
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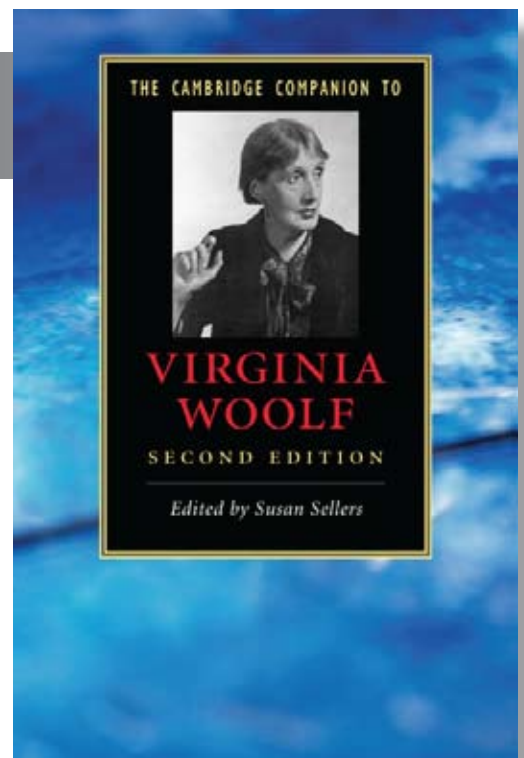
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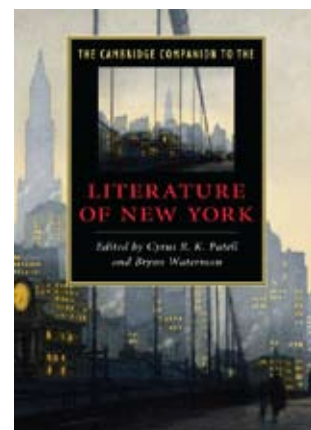
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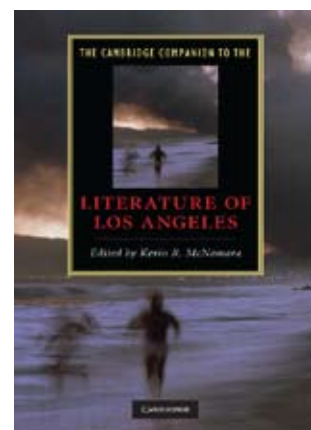
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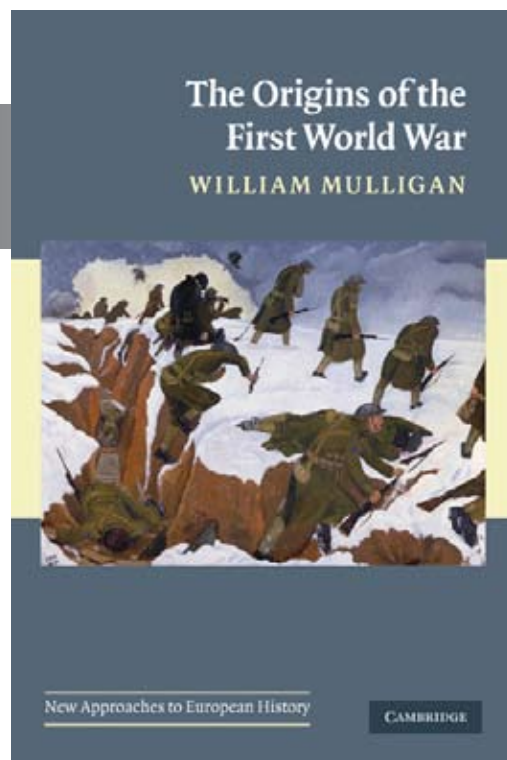
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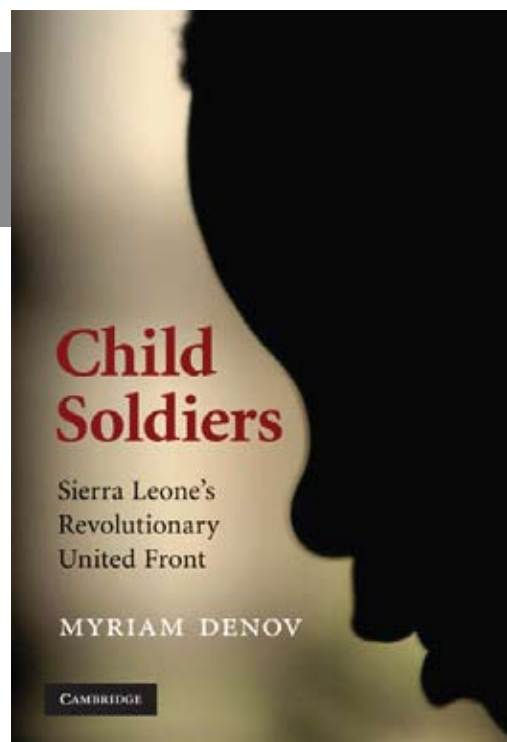
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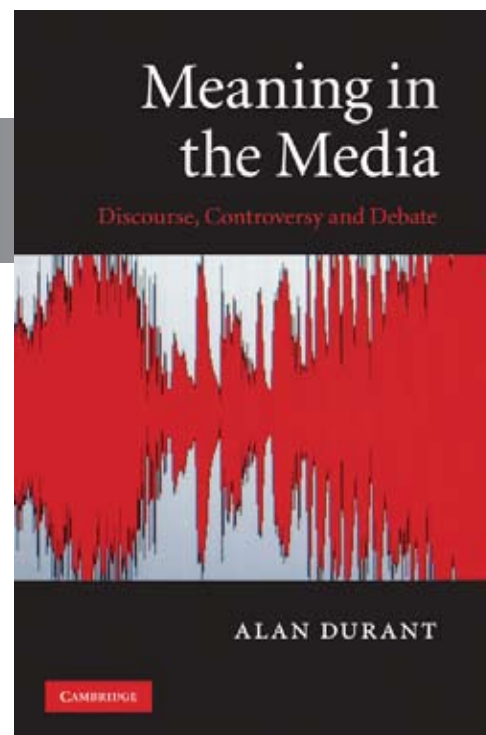
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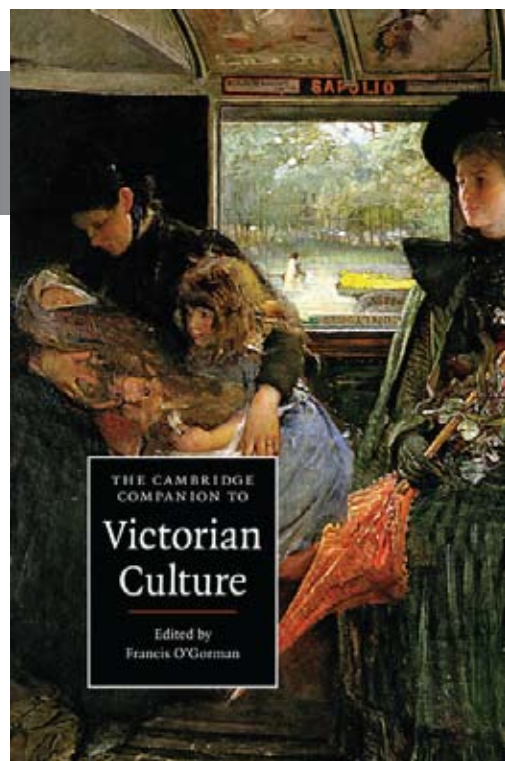
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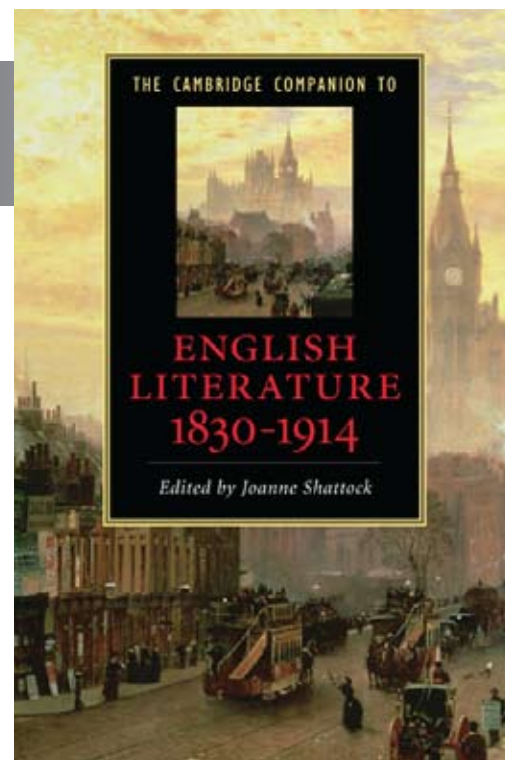
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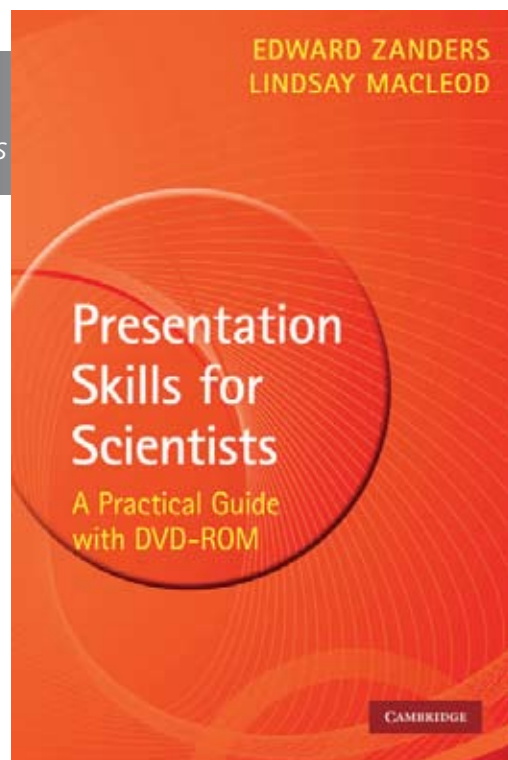
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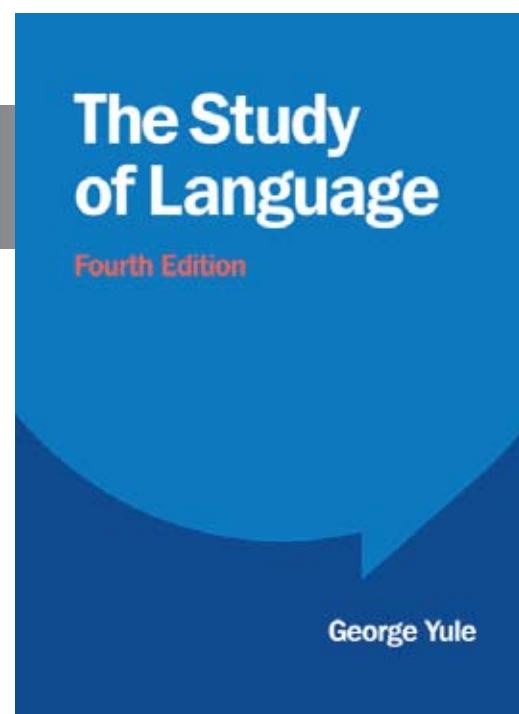
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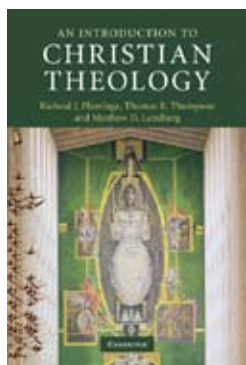
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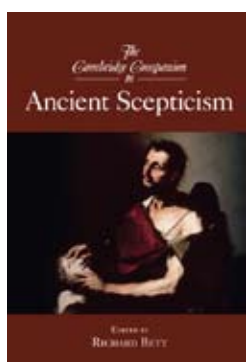
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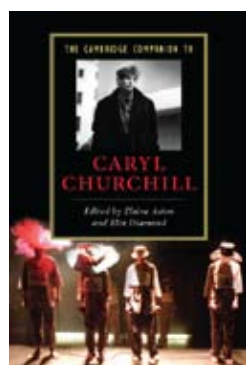
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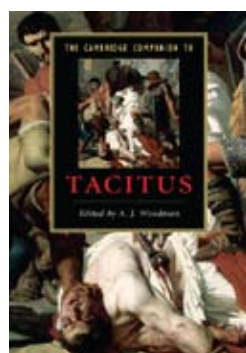
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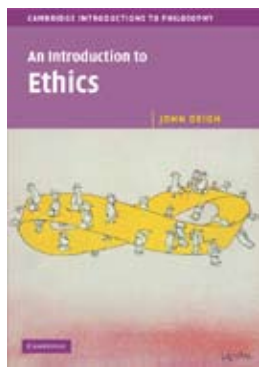
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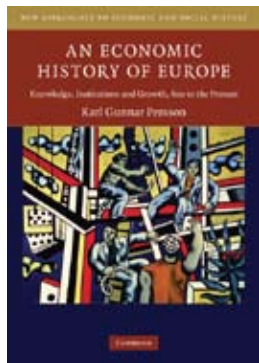
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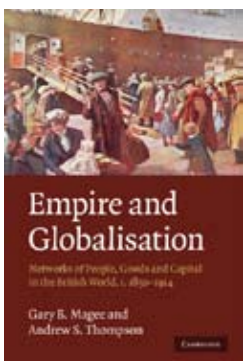
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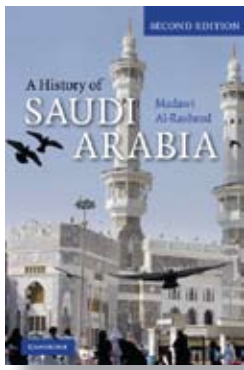
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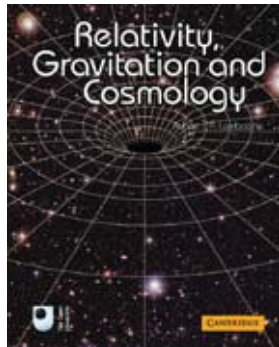
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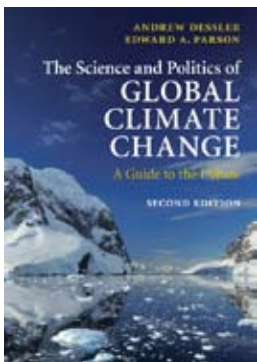
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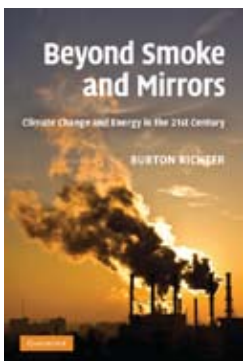
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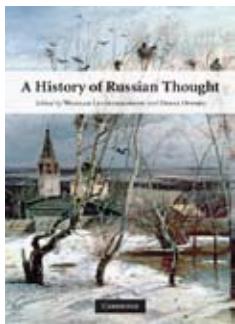
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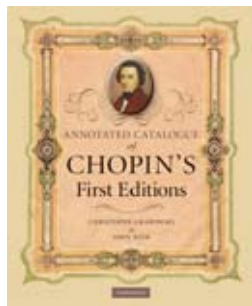
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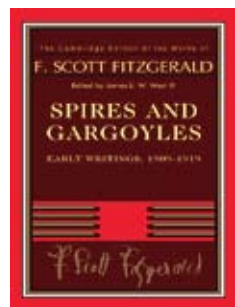
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