

In a comics industry that's often devoted to meaningless sales hype, "cosmic" stories are usually a dime-a-dozen, especially when your characters are often supremely powerful beings. "Epics" like Marvel's over-rated Infinity Gauntlet titles are often more spectacle than substance and wholly lacking in imagination. Thankfully, none of those criticisms apply to the recently released Green Lantern: Gantlet's Tale book. DC has, in this case, managed to produce a thought-provoking, entertaining, and visually stunning piece of comics literature.

For those unfamiliar with the title character, Green Lantern refers to Earthman Hal Jordan, who is the "Green Lantern" of Earth, chosen for virtue and fearlessness and given a ring-like weapon that allows him to tap and manipulate a near limitless green energy by means of his willpower, so long as he charges the ring each day at his lantern, which in turn draws its limitless power from the planet Oa, home of the self-proclaimed "Guardians of the Universe" who recruit beings such as Jordan to serve as members of an intergalactic police force called the Green Lantern Corps. The Guardians and the GLC have long been major recurring figures in the DC Comics continuity and figured prominently in DC's ground-breaking Crisis on Infinite Earths series, where the tale was repeated of how evil first began to spread in the universe millennia ago when an Oan scientist named Krona dared to break his immortal, advanced people's strongest law by attempting to observe the beginning of the universe through time, the one piece of knowledge that the Oans agreed they were not meant to know. Krona caught a glimpse of a cosmic hand forming galaxies in its palm before the machine blew up in his face and released, according to legend, the force of evil in the universe, a force the Green Lantern Corps was formed to combat. "This of course, is a lie," we are told in the retelling of the legend at the opening of Gantlet's Tale. From there, author Larry Niven goes on to reveal the truth behind that lie, and how the secret therein threatens the destruction of all that exists.

The tale's catalyst is Gantlet, a maverick Guardian who comes to Earth to enlist Hal Jordan's help in finding a hidden community of Maltusians (the mother race of which Oans are an offshoot) on Earth to serve as new recruits for the Corps. They soon ferret out the hidden community, learning that these Maltusians and their ancestors had been a hidden race on Earth for centuries, and were the source of legends such as those of leprechauns, fairies, and Arthurian mystics. Content for decades to be secluded from humans in what wilderness remains on Earth, the Maltusian tribe are uninterested in their birthright to join the advanced culture of their brethren on Oa, and Gantlet finds only one recruit, a Maltusian named Percival who sees in the Corps the heroic tradition that he once upheld alongside King Arthur's knights. With the aid of Hal Jordan, Gantlet then races to train Percival in the use of the Green Lantern power so that the three of them can face the universal threat of which only Gantlet is aware, an attempt by renegade Maltusians to recreate Krona's unholy experiment. Gantlet explains how the creation-image Krona saw of a celestial hand was a ruse, an

illusion placed in the time stream by the Oans countless centuries ago to confuse and intimidate any being who sought to strike at the Oans by travelling back to the days of their civilization's emergence. The universe's true origin is imperceptible, but by letting his own time probes reflect forward from this chaos, Gantlet saw what the "celestial hand" image has been meant to distract people from, the fact that the Maltusians (later the Oans) were, at an early stage in their development, warlike savages. Gantlet goes on to reveal the more terrible secret, that Krona's crime had not been in seeing the hand illusion but instead in trying to probe beyond it, not to the past as Gantlet did but attempting to see the beginning of time by looking past the end of time, when the universe has succumbed to entropy and collapsed into nothingness. In doing this Krona apparently, in some inexplicable manner, linked the end of time to the beginning and shortened the lifespan of the universe by a billion years, snuffing out countless lives that would now never exist.



It was actually to atone for this secret monstrosity that the Green Lantern Corps was founded, and now a desperate Gantlet reveals his race's hidden shame to Hal Jordan and Percival so that they can join him in trying to stop renegade Maltusians from duplicating Krona's experiment.

It's a wonderful science fiction story, as one would expect from award-winning science fiction writer Larry Niven who makes a rare foray into comic books with this book. Niven's tale of timeless secrets and impending universal doom has the kind of scale that deserves the term "cosmic", and he mixes this with bits of heroic legend and myths in the "Green Knight" Percival and his people, not to mention the modern "superheroic" tradition that Green Lantern Hal Jordan comes from. In a story of this scale Hal Jordan is as much the plot's vehicle as its protagonist, and it would be easy for him to get lost in the action, but Niven is careful to divide the action between the