“If you prepare material ahead of time, it won’t work. The audience can tell.”

Don’t be misled: n+1 is not a math quarterly. It’s a twice-yearly literary magazine whose first issue declared, in 2004, “We are living in an era of demented self-censorship... a time when a magazine like Lingua Franca can’t publish, but Zagat prospers.” Seven issues later, at more than 200 pages apiece, the Brooklyn-based n+1 continues to air trenchant views. “Pointed, closely argued, and often brilliantly original critiques of contemporary life and letters,” wrote A.O. Scott in the New York Times Magazine, describing n+1’s enterprise as “a generational struggle against laziness and cynicism.” Even intellectuals in Europe have championed it: theater director Alessandro Cassin, in Milan’s Diaria, for example, cited n+1’s “brand of intellectual bravery that has its roots in magazines like T.S. Eliot’s Criterion and the Partisan Review.”

Three of the four founding editors—Keith Gessen ’97, Mark Greif ’97, and Benjamin Kunkel ’96—honed their literary sensibilities at the Harvard Advocate. They’re no lightweight: Gessen and Kunkel have published novels, and Greif teaches at the New School in New York. (Executive editor Chad Harbach ’97, another Advocate alumnus, recently completed a novel of his own.) The fourth founding editor, Columbia graduate Mar- co Roth, catalyzed the venture. “Now we had somebody from the ‘outside,’” Gessen says. “It would have been embarrassing to have spent so much time talking about starting a magazine and not actually doing it.”

Each issue follows a similar format, beginning with “The Intellectual Situation,” a compilation of the editors’ views on, for example, the undermining of neoliberalism, the psychology of global warming, or the gentrification of Park Slope, Brooklyn. Then comes “Politics,” where one recent essay, “On Repressive Sentimentalism,”...
Montage considered the relationship between gay marriage and abortion rights.

Extended essays—they can run 10,000 to 15,000 words—occupy the bulk of the magazine, along with several fictional works and, occasionally, poetry. Topics range from the emergence of the “neuronovel,” the persecution of Armenians, and the impact of a brother’s suicide to the sundry ways food is viewed around the world. In “Jessica Biel’s Hand: The Cinematic Quagmire,” film critic A.S. Hamrah critiques dozens of recent movies about terrorism that he’d spent the summer watching. Greif’s “Mogadishu, Baghdad, Troy” explores the weapons deployed in Iraq through the lens of Homer’s Iliad. “We are interested in history and the connections between politics and literature,” Gessen explains. They also have a contemporary focus. “We deal with a theme—e.g., “Correction,” “Negation,” “Reconstruction,” “Happiness”—that’s determined after the content is compiled. Author Francine Prose ’68 calls the magazine quirky. “I hate that word, ‘quirky,’” she says, “but [n+1] has a kind of heartening connection to things that are unique, eccentric, and individual.” Prose calls its content “accessible, original, and beautifully written. It’s very literary in the best sense of the word.”

“The name n+1, conceived in a moment of frustration, comes from an algebraic expression. “Keith and I were talking,” Harbach recalls, “and he kept saying, ‘Why would we start a magazine when there are already so many out there?’ And I said, jokingly, ‘N+1’—whatever exists, there is always something vital that has to be added or we wouldn’t feel anything lacking in this world.” The founders did perceive a literary void: a dearth of cohesive philosophical ideas. Journals like The Baffler and Hermenaut, which critiqued contemporary culture and thrived in the 1990s, had disappeared; meanwhile, they saw an “institutionalization” of magazines like the Nation, the New York Review of Books, and the New Yorker. “There need to be organizations that are not as worried about offending people as you have to be if you have a million subscribers,” says Gessen. Unlike many literary journals, n+1 is, by design, distinct from academia. “Academia is the site of so much thinking in this country,” says Harbach. “Part of our project is to bridge that gap. We want all of the thoughtfulness and deep engage-
ment that comes from the university, but we want it in a style that is portable and publicly accessible.” Regarding their predilection for long pieces, Greif says, “We are creating a long print archive in an era of the short sound bite.”

There is also a website (nplusonemag.com), updated weekly with shorter, more topical pieces, plus a Small Book Series, whose latest product is What Was the Hipster, based on a New School seminar on the “hipster” persona that emerged—briefly—at the turn of the twenty-first century. Other projects include the online book review NiBR, and a spinoff, the arts journal Paper Monument. In 2010, HarperCollins will publish Diary of a Very Bad Year, Gessen’s interviews with an anonymous hedge-fund manager, first published on n+1’s website and in the magazine. “We’re a growing empire!” Greif says.

Nevertheless, after five years, there’s only one paid staff member. Half of n+1’s income comes from its 2,000 subscribers,
What This Country Needs
On detecting economic crises
by David Warsh

NEVER MIND the five-cent cigar. What this country needs is a good economic bull-detector program—along the lines of the faculty that Ernest Hemingway famously advised writers to develop—available in formats ranging from an iPhone application and giant SAP software to a free Linux version downloadable from the Web. Such a sensibility, put on a computer and run, would be especially useful with respect to those putative forms of non-fiction known as investment advice and political persuasion. The power of money to amplify a message is surely very great: a press release, an analyst’s report, a favorable book, multiplied by many millions of dollars, can turn a plausible wish into a widely shared conviction. The power to structure or to disguise information, even to withhold it, is greater still.

But such mastery is far from absolute. If you can measure what is entailed by a proposition, if you can express it in numbers, you have a chance of knowing something about it. Lord Kelvin, shake hands with Mr. Hemingway: empiricism, meet narrative. This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly, by Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, Cabot professor of public policy, is an unusually powerful bull detector designed to protect investors and taxpayers alike—eventually, at least, and provided the spirit is willing.

At this time of global and domestic economic crises—with their concurrent political and diplomatic ramifications—all of which seemingly took policymakers, investors, and the public by surprise—any evidence that warning signs of such disasters can be analyzed in advance is to be warmly welcomed. And in fact, here it is, useful not only for the present circumstances but as a brisk reminder of the recurrence of human folly, or the willful ignorance that passes for it.

Seldom has a book arrived containing more moving parts between its covers. For instance, it is easy to mistake This Time Is Different for the many books that have appeared over the years about the history of international financial crises, long on story-telling flair but short on data. The most famous of these, Charles P. Kindleberger’s Mania, Panics and Crashes, is wonderful fun to read. There are, however, few yarns in Reinhart and Rogoff’s book. Instead, This Time Is Different is really about a massive database that the