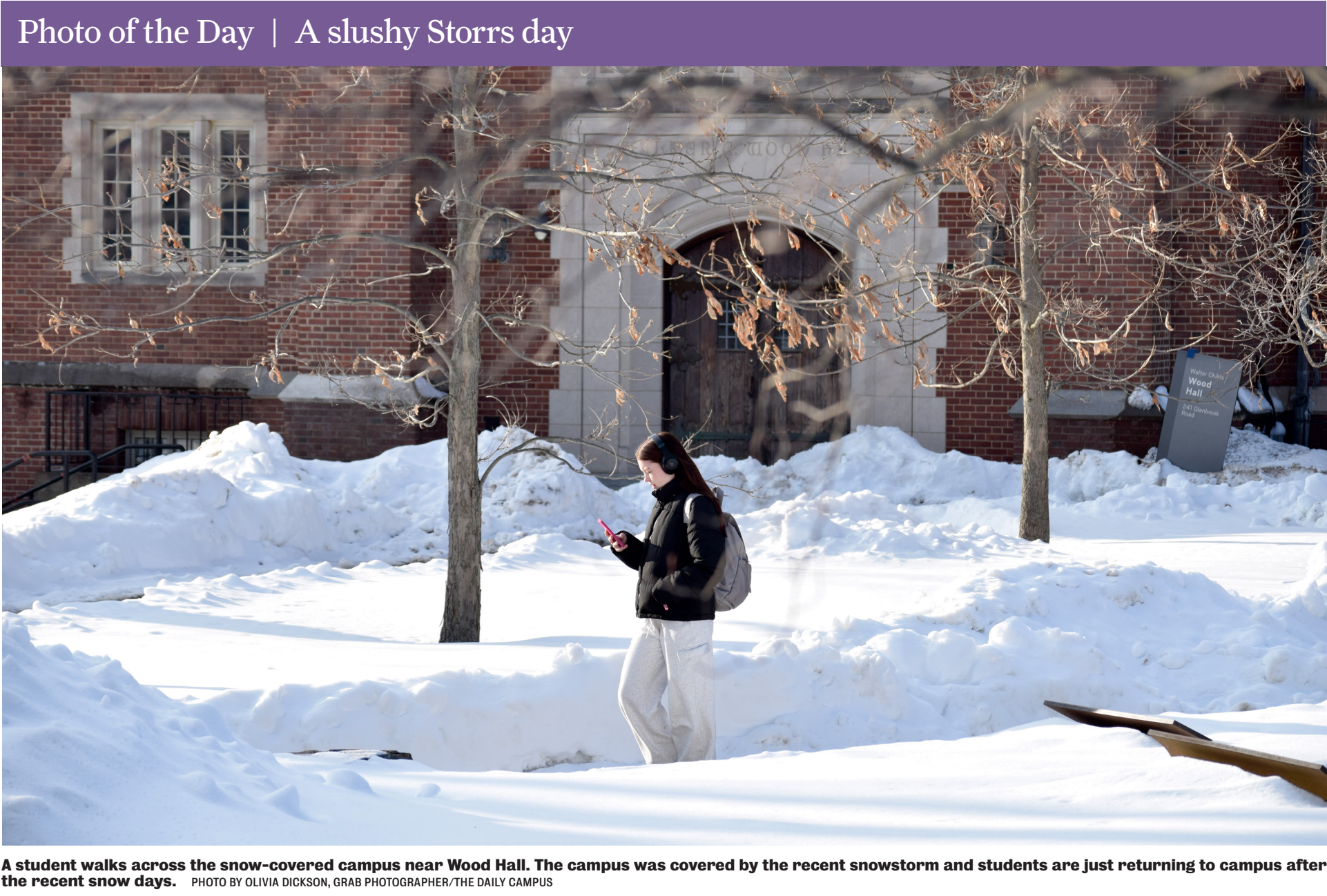


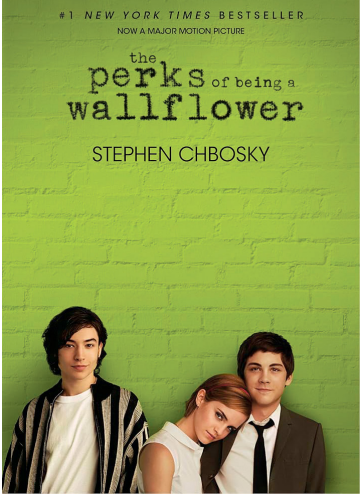


A student walks across the snow-covered campus near Wood Hall. The campus was covered by the recent snowstorm and students are just returning to campus after the recent snow days. PHOTO BY OLIVIA DICKSON, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

The kids aren’t alright: Inside New Jersey’s book ban

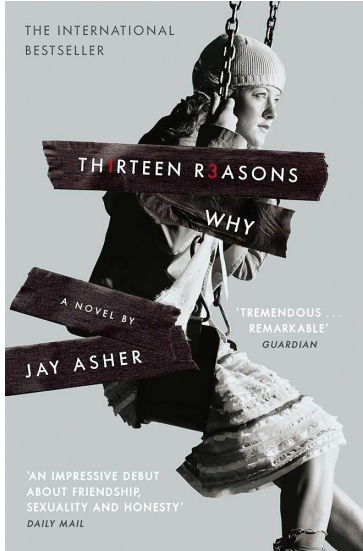
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The United States was first built on the principles of the freedom of speech — our right to share both information and stories, to guarantee our pursuit of new ideas and knowledge. So integral was this ideal to our new-born nation that its protection was enshrined within our fledgling government’s First Amendment, to be used and upheld in the centuries to come. That was, at least, what our founding fathers intended. Yet, within a mere 50 years of The Bill of Right’s passing, Congress’s Comstock Laws had placed a ban on the shipment and mailing of “obscene, lewd, or lascivious, and filthy book[s].” Under these acts, countless books, including those advocating for our modern-day standards of contraception and sex-ed, were



repressed, setting our society back decades, if not more. Since then, book bans have only increased across the nations — in no place more than our schools. Within the past two academic years, over 17,000 of these books have been restricted or removed from academic shelves, including titles as critically acclaimed as “The Perks of Being a Wallflower,” “13 Reasons Why” and “Looking for Alaska.” Most recently, “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” named one of the best books of the 21st century by the New York Times Book Review, was banned in New Jersey’s South Orange and Maplewood school district for the misplaced purpose of student safety.

Tragically, the decision was made in light of an onslaught of severe mental health crises that has recently gripped the



local education system. Columbia High School, one of several schools in the district, has faced five attempted suicides by students this year, along with the accidental death of one more. To combat these concerning trends, school administrators made the decision to ban the book, despite push back from both students and teachers. Strangely, this decision was the first made to address the horrific incidents — student counseling and crisis support were only offered much later. The district claimed that by removing the book, which addresses mental health struggles, they would be removing a dangerous influence on the minds of their students, shielding them from the harsh realities of the world.

True to their point, Oscar Wao does address the tolls of the mental health epidemic that has gripped our nation. In it, the titular character even makes an attempt at suicide, though it fails to kill him and he is eventually able to recover. Bans targeting books for this reason are not uncommon: In a November 2024 report, PEN America, a nonprofit organization of writers that advocates against censorship, found nearly 60% of banned books specifically depict grief, death, suicide, substance abuse, depression or other mental health concerns.

It is easy for us to take these retractions at the face value of protecting our kids from the worst aspects of life. However, taking away the literary repre-

sentation of students’ struggles only removes our ability to offer children the mental health literacy needed to address the monsters in their own lives. While an unfortunate truth, we live in a world where one-seventh of students between the ages of 10 and 19 struggle with a mental disorder. Among the same age group, suicide is the third most leading cause of death. As tempted as we may be to shelter children from this grim reality, a strong mental health curriculum is needed to help combat these numbers, with representation and resources available to students no matter what.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, then, is critical for such a curriculum. The book itself teaches a diverse set of themes easily found in our own world. Included in its pages are debates and conflicts centered around sexuality, body dysmorphia, mental health, suicide, code switching, racial identity and what it means to be “masculine.” Each of these issues is critical in the development of young minds, where identity formation is at its most acute. Banning books that cover these diverse topics and characters rob them of the opportunity to have open conversations in a safe environment. What results are students who feel the mental health challenges they face are wrong — that they are in some way broken for feeling the way they do. Removing stories that represent these issues does not encourage our kids to seek help, nor does

it push them to feel comfortable enough to talk about their experiences. Instead, it only encourages them to push their troubles deep down within themselves, creating a serious dysphoria that only serves to breed the tragedies that South Orange and Maplewood have recently grappled with.

Stories then, such as The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, give readers cause to understand and process the world around them, providing the common language needed to discuss their own experiences. If we remove these books, we inadvertently teach students that the topics they address are both alien and illogical — far from the impression we should give if we want to combat the mental health epidemic that is rocking their age group. Thankfully, action has been made against the ban in South Orange and Maplewood. After pushback from parents and students, the district said that parents could sign a permission form to allow their children to study the novel in class — though PEN America, the group dedicated to free expression, still classifies this “compromise” as a book ban. What is left, then, is both a need and desire for further action. If we truly want to “protect” our children and students, we must provide them with the tools needed to confront their problems head on, not rob them of the agency to understand their own feelings. That starts with putting the books back on the shelves.

COMIC BY KLEA OMERI, CONTRIBUTING ARTIST

