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# counterpunch

**edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair**

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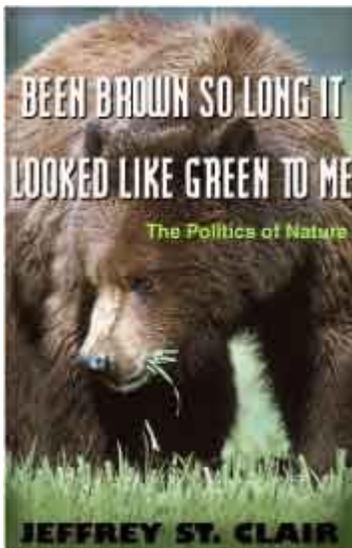
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From Common Courage  
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**Stop Prison Rape Edition**

August 1, 2003



Been Brown So Long,  
It Looked Like Green to Me:  
The Politics of Nature  
by Jeffrey St. Clair

## Trivializing Prison Rape

### Who Moved My Soap?

By ALEX COOLMAN

**N**ow that Martha Stewart has been criminally indicted, we're curious to know when the jokes are going to start about the possibility that she'll be raped in prison.

Maybe Jay Leno can do a monologue on the subject, suggesting a few wacky tips to help Stewart avoid sexual assault behind bars. Maybe the idea of rape in prison can even be used as a gag in commercials and turned into some kind of hilarious parody of a business advice book.

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Unfortunately rape in prison is routinely exploited in exactly these ways. The latest entry in the prison rape joke genre is Andy Borowitz' new book *Who Moved My Soap? The CEO's Guide to Surviving in Prison*, which is a tongue-in-cheek primer for business executives facing the possibility of spending time in prison, and includes the predictable discussion of life as a "prison bitch" and the hazards of "peter-gazing."

Martha Stewart's name hasn't been dragged into this newest rape "joke" because she's a woman and our society now understands that the rape of women isn't funny.

But in Borowitz' hands, the rape of men in prison is once again being treated as fodder for cruel, inane humor instead of what it really is: one of the most appalling, institutionally ignored abuses of human rights in this nation.

Borowitz' book has met with lavish praise from business magazines, which treat his unapologetic use of prison stereotypes and recycled riffs on rape as if they were about the most original thing ever set down on the printed page. *Fortune* called it a "must-read," while Lou Dobbs told his CNN audience that Borowitz' material was really "fresh and funny."

The only problem with all this business media chuckling is that, for the more than 2 million American men and women who are actually behind bars, rape isn't a punchline. It's a reality. And it isn't any funnier when it happens to thousands of anonymous victims than it would be if it happened to Martha Stewart.

Among the gags found in *Who Moved My Soap?* is the suggestion that a CEO can avoid being attacked by turning into a "'psycho' inmate who might 'nut out' without warning" thereby causing other inmates "to stay far out of his way and look upon him fearfully - beginning their gradual

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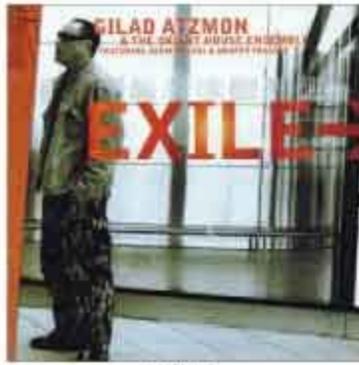
transformation into punk-ass bitches."

The frightening reality behind the "humor" here is that the transformation Borowitz is describing is an actual phenomenon. Non-violent inmates, who are the most common targets for sexual assault behind bars, are routinely forced to resort to extreme violence as the only way to fend off rape. And they're in danger of bringing this learned violence into society when they are released from custody. Sexual abuse in prison, a problem that affects as many as one in five male inmates, according to the best studies on the subject, has been deemed a form of torture by international legal bodies. Rape behind bars has a host of damaging effects on individuals and society. It spreads diseases including HIV, it undermines the legitimacy of the justice system, and it leaves victims susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and suicide.

In a publicity interview for his book on MSNBC, Borowitz said: "I try to write about things that people care about. Laughing about these subjects is often the best way for all of us to deal with them."

There are a lot of subjects for which this is true. Laughter is a great healer. But laughter can also be a way to trivialize real harm. That's why racist jokes won't make it into Jay Leno's monologue, why quips about the Holocaust aren't used for commercials, and why sexual brutality shouldn't be exploited in a book of business comedy. Laughing about rape dehumanizes the victims, and in the public discussion of rape behind bars, this has happened for far too long.

Stop Prisoner Rape is a national human rights group that works to end sexual violence against men, women, and youth in all forms of custody. We have no desire to censor anyone's right to free expression. The one thing we recommend, however - not only for Borowitz, but also for many others who routinely make jokes about rape behind bars - is that it might be worth speaking to an actual survivor of prisoner rape before writing the next wisecrack about this subject.



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July 29, 2003

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Try contacting us first. We can connect you with men and women throughout the country who have been raped and sexually brutalized while in custody. Not one of them found the experience funny.

**Alex Coolman** is Communications Coordinator of [Stop Prisoner Rape](#). He can be reached at: [acoolman@spr.org](mailto:acoolman@spr.org)

**See Also:**

[Prison Bitch](#)  
 by Steve J.B.

[Stopping Prison Rape](#)  
 by Joanne Mariner

## **Weekend Edition Features for July 26 / 28, 2003**

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