

End of the line

*Wherever he goes — supermarkets, airports, banks, theatres, sporting grounds
— Steve Bunk finds he is where he least wants to be — in a queue.*

How do I hate queues? Let me count the ways. I hate them more than lawn-mowing, more than cheery greetings before coffee, more than disco music, apartment blocks, incessant commercials in primary colours and all the other reminders each day that civilisation feeds on a gruel of predictability and dour repetition. I hate them because they impose order, and because that order is necessary. I loathe the impartial ways queues quash my fragile illusions of a life free from convention by making me toe the line with everyone else. I avoid no societal configuration more avidly, albeit unsuccessfully.

Nobody knows who invented queues but the word derives from Latin so my guess is it was some misguided Roman centurion trying to organise the business of ransacking, pillaging and distributing the spoils of victory. Similarly, modern queues seem to fail only where self-interest goes beyond control, like at the pub, or when trying to reach your car first after the football game. Queues are Machiavellian refinements of the herd instinct which

simultaneously mask and provoke the animal in us all. Like neckties and lipstick, they occur wherever people bent on similar goals converge and conform, even if that conformity only thinly disguises the predators within.

How ferret-like is the fellow trying to creep past me in a queue at the airport check-in counter, shuffling a quarter-step at a time, all the while resolutely shunning eye contact. Meanwhile, the woman waiting behind me keeps shoving baggage into the backs of my legs, as if this will make everything happen faster. Such manoeuvres are particularly rank because they're at close-quarters, mere centimetres of distance describing the gulf of our understanding. Nobody could be blank enough not to notice the offence, so I guess these people are betting I'll be too polite to comment. They're usually right, and that's what really irks me — how can they tell?

The blood-rush that queues can cause is their only benefit; harder to take is their tedium. I can't count the number of events I've skipped simply to evade the any-

mous interminable boredom of a queue. At passport control, fear of choosing the longest or slowest line always causes me to vacillate so much that I'm among the last to get past the inspectors into the baggage claim area.

In the shopping centre, a new check-out counter opens and I see it, but too late; I'm stuck behind a septuagenarian with a full trolley under a sign that reads "express lane". I usually feel hot and bothered in a shopping line even though the air conditioning is on "ice". I often have to use the toilet but am afraid of losing my place. And I always realise I forgot the mushroom soup. Then the check-out kid holds aloft a box of someone's leg wax and quavers into the climate-controlled troposphere that queuer's death knell: "Price check".

The discipline of a bank queue is even more uncompromising than that of a grocery store. It ropes us all into a semblance of civility which is belied by the flashing sign we're supposed to watch instead of the tellers, like cattle being lured into the back of a truck by a big painting of a pasture. I prefer to queue outside, despite the man at the auto-teller who stands right beside rather than behind me as I do my business. Has he discovered and memorised my secret number? Do I dare throw away the balance slip? My watcher has seen exactly how much cash I've withdrawn; it's almost worse than a urinal lineup.

But queues at entertainment venues are the most depressing of all, precisely because we're supposed to be there to have a good time. Those tiny steps you have to take, like a human centipede, and all the warts and blemishes on necks and noses, magnified by nearness, are too surreal for my taste. Then, amidst the candied cloud of perfume and aftershave, someone always breaks wind.

Yes, queues are necessary and no, I don't have a better option. I'm just saying I do my best to sidestep them as invasions of personal space — a phenomenon demonstrated to me years ago by a friend who stood very close and suddenly yelled, "AARRAGAAH". It was a memorable performance. And I didn't even have to queue up for it. □



Brain Games Answers. Cryptosquare: 1. Tramp 2. Romeo 3. Amble 4. Melts 5. Poesy. Garnama: HMS Pinafore. Who Said That? 1. Former Qld Police Commissioner Ray Whitrod 2. Poet Don Marquis, 'Archy and Mehitabel'.