

### **“Challenging Age Norms in the City: Cornelia Funke’s *The Thief Lord* and the Child Flâneur”**

In their conceptualization of the urban “flâneur,” both Charles Baudelaire (1863) and Walter Benjamin (1935) allude to a child’s curiosity, flexibility and constant state of newness. The analogy inspired children’s literature scholar Eric Tribunella (2010) to develop the notion of the “child flâneur” – a fictional child who roams the city, observing and exploring it with a sense of wonder and critical and aesthetic engagement. In this talk, I will apply the concept of the “child flâneur” to Cornelia Funke’s *Herr der Diebe* (published in German in 2000; translated into English as *The Thief Lord*), and reflect on how Venice—as a city of water—impacts the children’s experience of the urban space. Funke’s novel describes the adventures of two orphans, Prosper and Bo, who have fled to the city of Venice to escape the clutches of their cold aunt Esther. The two brothers assist the so-called “thief lord,” a boy called Scipio, in his quest to find a merry-go-round that can transform children into adults, and vice versa. Funke’s urban fantasy story and its preoccupation with transgressions of age norms in particular, put into a critical perspective the nostalgic aspect in the concept of the (child) flâneur, as envisioned by Benjamin and Tribunella, and the ideal of gradual development of the traditional Bildungsroman. Even while it depicts gangs of children roaming and controlling the city of Venice, *The Thief Lord* mainly highlights the limits of the child’s potential for self-expression and self-determination, and is even more critical about the adult’s nostalgic longing for childhood on which Benjamin’s link between the flâneur and youth relies. Paradoxically, *The Thief Lord* situates that childlike, carefree curiosity more in the adult – the adult flâneur Victor Getz – than in its actual child characters.