

WINGED VICTORY

LIKE SHAUN TAN'S *THE ARRIVAL*, TOHBY RIDDLE'S PICTURE BOOK WILL MOVE AND DELIGHT READERS OF ALL AGES. WRITES **BLANCHE CLARK**



TOHBY Riddle's four-year-old daughter once told him she needed pictures that surprised her. It's advice the author and illustrator keeps in mind when he creates his books.

"It helps if you are going 'Wow, look at that,' when you put something together," he says.

The collages in his new picture book, *Unforgotten*, combine illustrations, photographs and archival images to create worlds that blend past and present.

He used Photoshop as an "assembly place".

"I used to do it by hand, but it would have been almost impossible because some of these illustrations had more than 100 elements," says Riddle, who has produced seven picture books.

"In terms of style and technical stuff it was a lot of new territory for me. It was quite ambitious."

Unforgotten begins with angels flying high above Europe and follows one that is grounded by weakness, and who wanders unseen through a city populated by strange figures, until an eclectic group of children, animals and a clown helps it heal.

It has the same mesmerising quality as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, a wordless book about a migrant who finds himself in a bewildering city.

Riddle says images of dreamy, fantastic cities with angels flying through them popped into his head many years ago.

"I was excited by those images, but it took a long time to work out how to make a story of that," he says.

"Eventually I came up with that first line: 'Nobody knows where they come from. But they come' and from that I was able to build a narrative."

He says angels represent our spiritual side rather than a particular religious belief system.

"There is something about angels that does touch me deeply," he says.

"There is this fascination with things that aren't bound to the earth. They transcend and defy gravity."

"There is also the idea there, too, that there is a layer just outside our perception most of the time,

and there is some kind of kindness or goodness there that can sometimes affect us."

Riddle, who worked as a cartoonist for a newspaper for nearly 10 years, says angel figures have appeared in his cartoons for years.

"There is one cartoon where people are looking at a limousine and thinking someone really important must be going past, and angels are walking behind them.

"Their attention is one way and they are missing out on that moment. It is an interest in what lies at the edges of our perception."

He says he feels a deep affection for the gang — a boy, girl, clown, dog, duck and donkey — that rescue the angel.

"Maybe they represent a part in all us, a childlike way of seeing the world. It's open to interpretation."

Five years ago, Riddle and his family moved from Sydney to the Blue Mountains when he decided to become a full-time author.

He works in the attic, which he accesses via a pull-down ladder, and the images of clouds in *Unforgotten* were taken from his attic window.

He sometimes asks his children — aged 4, 7, and 8 — what they think of his work as it progresses.

"It's handy because they have quite a different perspective to mine," he says.

"It's also harder to be insulted by a child, whereas if an adult said something I might feel wounded."

But generally he doesn't seek feedback while he is working because it "dissipates the energy".

Riddle originally studied architecture, and though he has never practised, his interest in buildings and cityscapes comes through in his pictures.

He finds the great metropolises of America, such as New York, artistically inspiring.

But he hopes his love of Australia will come through more explicitly one day.

"I am always thinking about what it is to be Australian, and Australian colours and landscape.

"I love all those things."



Unforgotten, by Tohby Riddle, A & U Children, rrp \$35

Tohby Riddle is a guest at the Melbourne Writers Festival tomorrow.