Dancers are young when they first dream of dance. Siena was six -- and her dreams kept skipping and leaping, circling and spinning, from airy runs along a beach near her home in Puerto Rico, to dance class in Boston, to her debut performance on stage with the New York City Ballet. To Dance tells and shows the fullness of her dreams and her rhapsodic life they led to. Part family history, part backstage drama, here is an original, firsthand book about a young dancer's beginnings -- and beyond.

My Personal Review:
How should your average adult shopper determine the difference between a graphic novel that is good and a graphic novel that is bad? It's simple. If a graphic novel is bad then it will be poorly illustrated, shamefully written, and just dull all over. If a graphic novel is good it can convert the unconvertible. I work with a woman who is a self-proclaimed woman too old for graphic novels. She never dug them. Never much cared for them. And then To Dance fell into her lap and BANG! Instant fan. This should come as no very great surprise. We're dealing with the Siegel duo. Mark Siegel the illustrator may at this point in time be best known for Seadogs: An Epic Ocean Operattea which he penned with aplomb. He's the editorial director of First Second (the company that gave the world that go-buy-it-right-now book American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang) and a talented artist in his own right. And Ms. Siena Cherson Siegel attended the School of America Ballet where she studied preprofessionally (as the book's author blurb says) for twelve years. So what couple is better suited to depict the rigor and wonder of how a child becomes a ballerina, I ask you? This is a biography like you've never seen it before.

Siena begins her story this way: Big, empty spaces always made me dance. She yearned to move. First growing up in San Juan, Puerto Rico and then later when her family moved to Boston. For Siena, dance was in her heart and mind. She flew to New York in 1977 to get a taste of dance rigor at the American Ballet Theater and discovered that she wanted to be a ballerina more than anything. A year later she auditioned for the School
of American Ballet (founded by George Balanchine) and got in. As her home life grew unpleasant, Sienas time with the ballet became even more precious to her. The book tracks what its really like to be both a kid and a professional ballerina. And though she quit at the age of 18 and followed other pursuits, she still dances today. Dancing fills a space in me.

I must say that if the Siegels had put their heads together and said, Lets find a way to stymie library catalogers everywhere they couldnt have done better than to create a graphic novel biography. Where the heck do you put it in the collection? Itll never attract its key audience in the biography section, but wont it also get lost in the fantasy/manga shuffle if you stick it in with the other graphic novels?Whats a librarian to do? If I ruled the world Id create a whole new section of gn bios and then insist that everyone from Toni Morrison to Ray Bradbury create one (art by others, of course). Ms. Siegels memoir, however, is particularly well-written. I loved the little details of Sienas life that she was able to work into the story. Its a mere slip of a book, but theres an abundance of great details here. I was particularly fond of young Sienas fears that if her relatives had huge boobs then maybe she herself would get huge boobs. The next panel is of little Sienna lying in bed as an image of a big boobed self dances through her head. Less blaten was the book that started it all. In the story Siena receives the book A Very Young Dancer and is enchanted by it. As a kid, I too had a copy of that book, and I can attest to how entrancing it was. For a kid growing up in the Midwest, the idea of a kid like myself getting to live in New York to dance professionally was a wild magnificent dream. Now kids today can relive that dream, only now with Siegels book as their guide.

And then theres Marks art. I thought it was pretty nice and all for the first few pages, but then I came to an image he drew of two hands crossed against a pure black background that blew me away. I am a great admirer of hands and Mark knows how to draw them. Heck, he knows how to draw ballerinas period! Their poses, positions, and gestures are captured here so well that Mr. Siegel must have studied ballerinas and their moves for hours on end. Then theres the layout of the book itself. Instead of strict panels of corresponding shape and size, Siegel expands and contracts his spaces according to the storys plot. When Siena and her friends put on silk kimonos and explore the New York State Theater on their own, they stand in the vast auditorium like three small colorful specks, dwarfed by magnificence. I also liked how Siegel chose to give his book chapters of a sort. The book is broken up under headings with names like Refuge and Dying Swan. As for the color scheme, Siegel uses watercolors here in variegated colors and shades. Quick eyes will also note that the first image of this book (that of Siena leaping across yellow sand as a child) is mirrored by the last image of this book (that of Siena leaping across yellow sand grown and WITH a child). Mark even makes his own headless cameo in the upper left hand corner of this last picture.
2006 seems to be the year for male artists to pen childrens book odes to their wives. Matteo Pericoli did it with The True Story of Stellina (also in watercolors). Now Siegel does the same with To Dance. Of course Siena Siegel wrote the book herself, so its not as if she didnt have any input or anything. There are so few graphic novels to compare this title to that I have a hard time conveying how nice it is to you. Ill just say this: Kids (girl kids, some might say) like ballerinas. The book shows ballerinas in spades, has a great eclectic format, some great writing, and beautiful art. If you think you can do better for your kids, go ahead. Be my guest. Just remember To Dance when you find yourself seriously stumped gift-wise. Its a gem.

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