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Review of *Wright Morris Revisited* By Joseph J. Wydeven

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Wright Morris Revisited. By Joseph J. Wydeven. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998. Photographs, preface, acknowledgments, chronology, notes and references, selected bibliography, index. xviii + 212 pp. \$28.95.

A major American writer, author of thirty novels, Wright Morris is highly regarded by critics, but some readers find his work difficult. Morris himself felt that a full understanding of any of his novels required a thorough reading of them all. His style, too, is sometimes deliberately enigmatic; he did not believe in a tidy closure to the problems he introduced. Joseph J. Wydeven discusses these and other perplexities in *Wright Morris Revisited*, aptly titled, as the last Twayne study of Morris was published in 1964.

A number of Morris's books are set in Nebraska, where he was born. He often transformed "autobiographical facts into fictions" drawn from his youth. A major influence on him was his mother's absence; she died shortly after his birth. Describing himself as "half-orphan," he mythologized her early life, bonding to a woman he could never know. His interest in the mythic past contributed to his feeling of being "both in and out of this world."

Quite a different contribution to this feeling developed through his work with photography. Wydeven points out that Morris's scenes are written as if seen through the eye of the camera. The photographs included in Wydeven's study offer evidence for his contention that Morris's deliberate placement of artifacts, his concern for light and shadow,

and the sometimes subtle effects of the photos can also be seen throughout his writing.

Morris's characters often deal with happenings of the contemporary world (the atomic bomb, a serial killer in Nebraska, a current war). Morris would examine those events and their meaning over and over in his novels. During his fifty year career his attitudes sometimes changed as he reevaluated their significance to the people involved, as, for instance, in his depiction of women. In his early books his women were often intransigent termagants. They fit a popular psychological concept of the time—dominant women who intimidated their husbands and tied their sons to their apron strings. By his last novel, *Plains Song for Female Voices* (1980), he showed a much more sympathetic view of three generations of Nebraska women.

Wydeven knows his subject well; his book is based on solid scholarship and includes material from interviews with Morris as well as a number of his critics. His knowledge is clearly delineated in his discussion of Morris's work, both major and minor. He identifies Morris's sources and influences and explicates his themes: Morris's search for his place in the world; his interest in the myth of the West; his views of the search for "the American dream." Useful to readers of any level, Wydeven's study provokes interest in this man who so trenchantly portrayed ordinary people in our uncommon century.

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