This is an American regionalist novel about a family in rural Nebraska. It’s unusual because every double-page spread is a page of text facing a photograph. It’s a curious book, a mixture of some very dated-sounding mid-twentieth century rural Plains dialogue and simple photographs of chairs, tables, the ground, farm implements, and parts of buildings. I’ll just note four things in particular.

1. The relation of the images to the text varies

It seems Morris was working out how images related to text throughout his novel. Photographs vary widely in the way they are attached to the text. Here is an incomplete catalog:

(A) The person in the photograph is referred to in the text (p. 1).
(B) At several points the text might be referring to the photograph, and the reader may check that, but find there’s no connection (p. 3).
(C) The picture is an emblem of something in the text. Old people, the narrator says at one point, “were like the single plow below my window” because “you couldn’t show them, or give them anything”; this is accompanied by a photo of a plow. (p. 25).
(D) The image is an example of things listed in the text (p. 109).
(E) The image is a study of something that is only mentioned briefly, in passing, in the text (p. 130).
(F) The image doesn’t fit the narrative, or contradicts it. (P. 132, a photo of coats, opposite a description of an empty house; but the next page is of a bed that perfectly matches the narrative description.)
(G) Images that might, or might not, illustrate something in the text, making the reader cross back and forth from image to text (pp. 145, 146).
(H) An image described in the text is illustrated, but not on the facing page (pp. 141-2).

This list could be made about twice as long; for me, it’s a sign that the book was an ongoing experiment, never resolved during the writing. Hollander makes a point of one image that shows newspaper clippings that are quoted by the narrator; but it’s an anomaly, and it’s text-based (the image as such doesn’t play a part in Hollander’s description).

2. The layout changes.

The book has full-page images all the way up to p. 154, when the reader is surprised by a single photograph, printed across the gutter, with just seven lines of text on each page beneath. It’s significant that this double-lage spread is a family photo: more on that below.

From that point to the end of the book, the layout changes: the images are again full page, on the right, but the text
on the left pages doesn’t reach to the bottom of the page. The only conclusion it’s possible to draw is that Morris decided to write just as much as would respond to the image on the facing page, and then go on to the next pair. That makes for a much closer relation between image and text, because a reader knows that the paragraphs on each page were probably written with that particular photo in mind; it also makes the pages into prose poems or independent sections of prose, producing an entirely different effect than the one in most of the book, where the reader turns pages at the speed of the narrative. (When the text is continuous, you’re not obligated to stop a moment and look at each picture before you turn the page. When the text stops halfway down the page, it’s a signal that only that amount of text responds to the picture.)

3. There are few photographs of people.

This is a common theme, I’ve found, in novels with captionless images. The immediate reason is that if a character in the novel is shown in a photograph, it disrupts reading, and suspends disbelief, in a particular way, which is different from the way that a photograph of a house or a street might disrupt reading. There’s a lot to be said about this! In “The Home Place,” faces are presented in three ways: (A) In this family photograph, where people are small in the distance, so the reader’s imagination is still fairly free; (B) in photographs of portrait photographs hanging on walls (p. 20), so the reader is insulated by a representation of a representation; and (C) by throwing the face into shadow, as in the very first photograph in the book, which is of an old man and an inner tube, standing in front of a barn: we see the kind of place and person, but not the expression itself. (See also p. 127, where a face is in shadow, and p. 50, where we see the old man’s wrinkled neck from behind, but not his face.)


On p. 141, the narrator explains using ideas of Protestant imagery:

The word beauty is not a Protestant thing. It doesn’t describe what there is about an old man’s shoes. The Protestant word for that is character. Character is supposed to cover what I feel…

It would be interesting to pursue this reading: the images aren’t beautiful, in the way other authors (like Walker Evans?) had taken them to be; they have something to do with a non-aesthetic property called, inadequately, “character.”

5. The discontinuous history of novels with images.

The introduction by John Hollander names some precedents for The Home Place, which was published in 1968, including books in the 1930s that used photographs from the Farm Security Administration, and “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” (1941). Buy Hollander also notes that this book is “almost a unique sort of novel” because it is a novel “with” photographs, rather than “in” photographs. It’s possible Morris imagined himself as the inventor of this way of writing.