*A Very Fine House* Study Guide Answer Key

The following suggested questions are to guide discussion and/or gain an understanding of the social and political climate of the early 1970s. Historical/political (HP), and social/environmental (SE) references are organized by chapter titles.

The World is Coming to an End

(SE) Page 21: Letty says that black was beautiful. She is alluding to a social movement of the early 70s. What was this movement?

A movement to inspire cultural and racial pride in the black community. Its goal was to dispel the notion that the physical features of people of African origin were less attractive than the physical features of Caucasian people.

(HP) Page 21: Claire’s family fled Cuba in the early 1960s. Research why many Cubans fled during that period.

In 1960, the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center was set up to offer services to the middle- and upper-class Cubans who left in opposition to Castro’s rule. Castro toppled the regime of Baptista and imposed communism in Cuba.

(SE) Page 23: Research pagan babies. Are there any modern equivalents that address the plight of poor children in third world countries?

Pagan is defined as one who worships many gods or polytheism. The pagan baby program was promoted as a fundraiser for Catholic missionaries whose goal was to convert people to Catholicism. Modern equivalents may include World Vision and Feed the Children.

(SE) Page 24: Letty’s teachers claimed that Catholic school children were getting a better education than those in the public schools. Why were the newspapers claiming that “Johnny Can’t Read?”

A bestselling book published in 1955, by Rudolf Flesch, claimed that widespread teaching methods for reading were ineffective. This resulted in nationwide debates over the teaching of reading in public schools.

(SE) Page 26: The girls discuss people who sit in trees until their demands are met. Research the Elm Conflict in 1971. Was the protest successful?

Thirteen Scots elms were to be destroyed to prevent damage to a subway station in Stockholm, Sweden. A well-organized group climbed the trees to prevent their destruction. The demonstration was extensively coved in the media. The trees remain to this day.

(HP) Page 35: Why were East Pakistan and West Pakistan at war? What happened to these two countries?

The armed conflict between East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan) were over cultural differences. A major factor being religion (Muslim and Hindu) and the official language.

(HP) Page 35: What is firebombing? Why was this happening in Northern Ireland?

A firebomb is any incendiary device usually used in urban areas. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) sought to end British rule in Northern Ireland. The Loyalists (Protestants) wanted continued rule by the British while the Nationalists (Catholics) wanted Ireland to be an independent state.

(SE) Page 35: Why were white students being bused to schools with predominately black student populations in Boston? How was this issue resolved?

A Civil Rights program to desegrated Boston public schools, the program was opposed by the parents of white students resulting in demonstrations and protests. Eventually, students in Boston were allowed to attend their neighborhood school. Boston public schools are now highly segregated.

(HP) Page 35: Why were prisoners rioting at Attica Prison?

Prisoners demanded better living conditions and political rights. The ensuing riot lasted four days. Forty-three people were killed making the Attica Prison riot the bloodiest in American history.

(HP) Page 35: Who is Charles Manson, and why was he on death row? Research whether he was executed. Explain the circumstances.

Charles Manson was a cult leader who convinced his followers to murder several people including actress Sharon Tate. Although he was sentenced to death, the sentence was changed to life in prison when the death penalty was temporarily halted by the Supreme Court case *Furman v. Georgia*.

Afton Fellows

(HP) Page 38: Afton’s father, Gerard Case, was wounded at the Battle of Bentonville during the Civil War. How was this battle significant to the end of the war?

The heavy Confederate losses resulted in General Joseph Johnston surrendering to Union General William Sherman. A month later, General Robert E. Lee also surrender ending the war.

(HP) Page 38: Was Dr. Tichenor a real person? Briefly describe his contribution to history.

George H. Tichenor served in the Confederate army during the Civil War. He introduced antiseptic surgery saving the lives of many Confederate soldiers. His formula was patented and is still available.

(HP) Page 40: In his letter to Afton, Cedric Fellows says that his work on the Panama Canal would be for the “betterment of the world.” How is the world better because of the Panama Canal?

Prior to the building of the Panama Canal, ships had sail around the tip of South America to get from the American east coast to the west coast. This was very costly and time consuming. The canal allowed for increased commercial traffic between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. It also proved to be militarily important for American interest in the Caribbean and Central America.

Grounded

(HP) Page 51: Letty learns that the President Nixon ordered the bombing of Laos and Cambodia despite what he claimed. This act resulted in a bill passed by Congress called the War Powers Resolution. Research the War Powers Resolution and briefly explain it.

The War Powers Resolution was passed over Nixon’s veto. Commonly known as the War Powers Act, it limits the president’s power to deploy military troops without the consent of Congress.

(HP) Page 51: Lynn’s father tells her that “secret papers” have exposed that the war is bigger than what the government was reporting. What are these secret papers and what did they reveal?

The Pentagon Papers were reported in the New York Times. They revealed that the Johnson administration had lied to the public and Congress regarding the extent of the Vietnam War. Government efforts to block their publication led to *New York Times v. United States.* The Times was given the right to run the story.

(HP) Page 52: Blythe wanted to know if the students in her class should go out and join the war protesters who were getting arrested. What were the war protests and why were the protesters getting arrested?

War protesters often held demonstrations that were violent. The aim of some demonstrations was to interfere with the functioning of the government. Most notable were the protests of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the Kent State University shootings, and the May Day protests in Washington, D.C.

(HP) Page 58: During history class, a student says that American Indians had taken over Alcatraz? Research the American Indian Movement (AIM). Why did they occupy Alcatraz?

A group known as Indians of All Tribes took over Alcatraz Island in protest claiming that the Treaty of Fort Laramie required all abandoned federal land to be returned to the tribes that once occupied it. This led to the formation of the American Indian Movement.

Robin Drive

(SE) Page 61: Mr. Kirkland committed suicide because he suffered from battle fatigue or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Is this still a problem with soldiers who served in the wars in the Middle East?

Studies show that roughly 16% of soldiers returning from Afghanistan are affected by PTSD. Veterans diagnosed with PTSD have a higher rate of suicide than the general population.

(HP) Page 71: Mr. Chappel mentions the 26th Amendment. What is the subject of this amendment, and why was it passed during this period?

The 26th Amendment allowed eighteen-year-olds to vote. Prior to this amendment, the minimum voting age was twenty-one, yet eighteen-year-olds, who had no say in the war, were being drafted. The solution was to lower the voting age.

(HP) Page 72: The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)was very controversial. Research this amendment and explain why. Who were some of the most vocal proponents and critics of this proposed amendment?

Women were not allowed to get credit cards without their husband’s permission. They were often denied employment in jobs that were considered male occupations. The ERA would have outlawed these practices. Phyllis Schlafly launched a nationwide campaign against the ERA claiming that women would lose their benefits as mothers and dependent wives and could be drafted. Gloria Steinem, co-founder of the Ms. Magazine, was a major proponent of the ERA. The ERA did not pass.

Wanda

(HP) Page 93: Two of Afton’s sons died fighting World War I. What were the major alliances called and what were the major countries involved?

The Central Powers included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman Empire. The Allied Powers (Triple Entente) included France, Britain, and Russia.

(HP) Page 103: Afton’s son, Wade, died in the battle at Meuse-Argonne, France. What is significant about this battle?

This battle is the deadliest in American history. There were 26,277 American lives lost, an estimated 28,000 German dead, and an unknown number of French soldiers. Total casualties are estimated at 350,000. The battle last 47 days ending with the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

A Questioning of Faith

(SE) Page 129: Lynn says that many American soldiers in Vietnam were using drugs. How prevalent was the drug problem among American soldiers during the Vietnam war?

The data varies widely on the type of drugs used by soldiers in Vietnam. As many as 50% are believed to have tried opiates, but only 15% developed physical or psychological dependence.

(SE) Page 131: Letty says that it dawned on her what the Rolling Stones meant by their song, “Mother’s Little Helper.” What is mother’s little helper?

The Rolling Stones’ song refers to Valium. It was popular with American housewives to deal with the pressures of motherhood and working in a male dominated society.

(SE) Page 134: What is a P.O.W. bracelet?

Prisoner of War bracelets were used to increase awareness of American soldiers believed to being held prisoner or missing in action (MIA) during the Vietnam War. The bracelets were inscribed with the soldier’s name and lost date. They were to be given to the soldier upon his return.

(SE) Page 136: Letty mentions a book titled, *The Population Bomb*. Research the book and explain why Letty was so alarmed by it. Does the premise of the book hold true today?

Published in 1968, by Paul R. Ehrlich, it predicted that a worldwide famine was imminent due to overpopulation. The book called for an immediate end to world population growth. This did not come to pass.

(SE) Page 137: Letty mentions a book titled, *Silent Spring*. Research the book and explain why Letty was so alarmed by it. Does the premise of the book hold true today?

Published in 1962, by Rachel Carson, it revealed the adverse effects of pesticides on the environment. The book inspired the environmental movement and led to the banning of the pesticide DDT.

(SE) How are *The Population Bomb* and *Silent Spring* similar?

Both books increased awareness of environmental issues. The Environmental Protection Agency was subsequently established in 1970.

(HP) Page 138: Why did the newspapers report a burglary the Watergate building in Washington, D.C.? Describe this event.

The office of the Democratic National Committee was in the Watergate Office building. The investigation of the burglary exposed a cover-up and eventually led to the resignation of President Nixon.

(SE) Page 139: Who is Dr. Timothy Leary? What is the relationship between the deaths of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Dr. Leary?

Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, both top performing musical artists of the time, died within two weeks of each from drug overdoses. Widespread drug use was a highly promoted aspect of the counterculture. Dr. Timothy Leary was a Harvard professor who advocated the use of psychedelic drugs and was a well-known figure of the counterculture.

Heaven and Hell

(HP) Page 181: The 1.8-million-year-old skull discovered in 1972 is from a group of people called Pithecanthropus rudolfensis They were renamed *Homo rudolfensis* in 1986. Whose archaeological team discovered this skull?

Dr. Richard Leakey’s team discovered the skull on the shores of Lake Rudolf, Kenya.

White Flight

(SE) This chapter is titled White Flight. What does this mean?

In the 1950s and 60s, large numbers of white populations began to move out of urban areas to the rapidly growing suburbs. This migration was due mainly to increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the cities.

(HP) Page 181: Research the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. What tragic event happened during these Olympic games?

Nine members of the Israeli team and two others were taken hostage and killed by a Palestinian terrorist organization called Black September.

Taking it to the Streets

(SE) Page 224: The occupation of Columbia University by students in 1968 was over two main issues. What were these issues?

Students discovered a link between the university and an agency directly linked to support of the war in Vietnam. Additionally, the university planned to build a segregated gymnasium at a nearby park.

Courage is Contagious

(HP) Page 234: Governor George Wallace was a controversial figure in U.S. politics. What was the focus of his campaign during the 1972 primary election?

At the height of the civil rights movement, Governor Wallace campaigned on a promise of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

(HP) Page 234: Letty and her brothers were surprised to learn that a black woman was running for president in 1972. Research this woman and explain her connection to Governor George Wallace.

Shirley Chisholm was the first black woman elected to the House of Representatives. She was also the first woman and the first African American to seek the nomination for president from one of the two major parties. Both Chisholm and Wallace, an outspoken segregationist, were seeking the nomination for the Democratic party. After the attempted assassination attempt on Governor Wallace, Ms. Chisholm went to visit him in the hospital.

Topics for further discussion:

* Letty mentions her skin, eye, and hair color in addition to her ability to speak Spanish as defects instead of assets. Why is she trying to deny her Hispanic culture?
* What parallels are there between Afton’s house and Letty’s character development in the story?
* Several wars are mentioned throughout the story. What underlying threat is there between the wars and the characters?