The Arabian Nights

1. How would you categorize these stories: moral tales, fables, fantasies, adventure, or a mix of these? What aspects of these stories most interest you: the human or the supernatural?

2. What role do women play in these stories? Does anything about their roles surprise you?

3. What is the significance of Shahrazad's role as narrator, and how does she compare with the women in the stories?

4. Do you sympathize with King Shahrayar's outrage over his wife's infidelity? Do you think it justifies his madness? Does the story accept or question the King's absolute power?

5. What is the role of chance in the stories? To what extent do the human characters determine their own destiny?

6. The Arabian Nights is known for its distinctive literary structure of stories within stories. Do you think this narrative style is effective? How do the stories relate to one another? Do they enhance or oppose each other?
Conference of the Birds

1. How does the hoopoe become leader of the birds? Do you think he is a competent leader?

2. What is the significance of the excuses the birds come up with for avoiding the perilous journey to find the Simorgh?

3. With which of the hoopoe's stories do you most identify and with which the least? Why?

4. The two Sufi themes that run through this poem are the necessity of destroying the Self and the need for passionate love. How do the stories depict the ideal of love? Why might some of the stories be considered scandalous?

5. Do you think that a journey with such inherent dangers is worth it? Explain your answer based on what the survivors gained from the journey.
1. As a returning exile, Ka’s nostalgia for the homeland puts him in an optimistic state of mind. Does he remain in this mood throughout his stay in Kars? Was his involvement in the affairs of Kars a miscalculation on his part?

2. Kars is described in the book as a place at the crossroads of “two empires now defunct,” which has seen “endless wars, rebellions, massacres, and atrocity.” Despite the forced westernization of Turkey by Kemal Ataturk and the military, Kars experiences intense poverty and hopelessness. How has this history shaped the hopes and dreams of the town’s inhabitants?

3. Ka’s conversations with a variety of characters—Muhtar, Blue, the boys from the religious school, Sheikh Efendi, and Kadife—explore the gap between traditional Islam and Western secularism. How do these conversations affect Ka’s identity as an intellectual and the possibility of his own belief in God? Why is the realization of his spirituality so unsettling for him?

4. Throughout the novel, several explanations are given for the disturbing phenomenon of the suicide girls. Does the novel provide an answer to the mystery of why women are killing themselves in Kars?

5. What is the significance of Ipek’s love for Blue and Ka? Which does she ultimately love? Was Ka foolish to believe that love would bring him happiness?

6. Pamuk does a good job communicating the views of the Islamists versus the secularists and nationalists. Do you find your sympathies changing in regards to each group? Do any events in the story make you want to pick sides? Which side is Ka on?
Dreams of Trespass

1. Hudud or the “sacred frontier” is defined by Mernissi’s father as necessary because “Harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limit of the other; trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness.” Given this dictum, why do some women in the book dream of trespassing this frontier?

2. How does Mernissi define a domestic harem, as opposed to an imperial one? What are the possible political and social dimensions of secluding women in domestic harems?

3. What is the significance of the different stories offered by women in the book to explain the origins of harems?

4. How different are the lifestyles in the harem of Mernissi’s rural family and the one she lives in Fez? Why do these differences exist?

5. At one point in the book, the young Mernissi learns that Jews in Germany have to wear a yellow star to distinguish them from other Germans. What parallel does she draw between the yellow star and her own situation as a woman in Morocco?

6. A heroine from The Arabian Nights, Princess Burdur inspires women to “turn the world upside down” when their situation is hopeless. How does this relate to Mernissi’s life and how does it inspire her?

7. How does Mernissi illustrate the importance of women’s solidarity? How does she relate this ideal to tradition?
Minaret

1. Islam is often seen as either a cultural phenomenon or a political one. How does Najwa’s faith defy these easy categorizations?

2. This book might be read as a critique of Sudanese patriarchy, as every man in Najwa’s life seems to fail her. How does Najwa compensate for the lack of protection she experiences?

3. What kind of imagery does Aboulela adopt to convey the experience of cross-cultural encounters? How does she juxtapose themes of guilt and cleansing to explain Najwa’s experience in her new home?

4. In Najwa, Aboulela depicts an independent woman whose faith is not a matter of abstract dogma or empty rituals, but rather a struggle within: between the lures of an individualist consumerist culture and the promise of a communitarian religious experience. Does the position of a woman like Najwa challenge Western notions of feminism? How does she defy stereotypes of Muslim women?

5. Leila Aboulela claims to write fiction that reflects Islamic logic—fictional worlds where cause and effect are governed by a Muslim rationale. Do you see this reflected in Minaret?