Reading and Discussion Questions for *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, parts I (the Day of the Moat) and II (the exile of Rodrigo):

Here’s some starter questions on Guy Gavriel Kay’s *Lions of Al-Rassan*, to get you started thinking about it as you read; I’ll develop a second set for parts III-V while I’m waiting in airports over the weekend.

1. Why might Kay have made Jehane a physician? What kinds of plot and character reasons might he have for this decision? What thematic effects does he gain by having a major viewpoint character be a healer? Why might he want to include medicine in the novel more generally?

2. What aspects of medicine, either in general or in its medieval historical context (let’s just go ahead and take his alternate world as being a reasonable facsimile in general cultural/intellectual terms to our own, for simplicity’s sake) does Kay show us? What does it mean to be a physician in the world of the novel? To be a Kindath physician? How are physicians viewed and how do they view themselves and their professional identity? What does the novel tell us about doctor-patient relationships?

3. What contemporary (i.e., late 20th-century) relevance do the cultural – indeed, multicultural – setting of the novel and the events that occur in that setting have?

4. What kinds of roles do women play in the world of the novel? What kinds of power are they able to exert, and in what realms? How do they negotiate limitations on their social or personal power? What social and cultural pressures do they feel and/or need to cope with?

5. The three religions of Kay’s world – in this matter, unlike our world – all use heavenly bodies as divinities (or at least as manifestations of their divinities): the sun of the Jaddites, the stars of the Asharites, and the moons of the Kindath. How does this authorial choice (what kinds of religions would you create?) affect other elements of the novel – our sense of its similarity or difference to our own history, its use of descriptions of nature, the relations among the three religions, etc., etc. What other details does Kay invent in his depiction of the three religions?

6. What are the basic forces for good and the basic forces for evil in *The Lions of Al-Rassan*? What role do honor, courage, compassion, warfare, religious beliefs, pragmaticism, friendship, loyalty, and other values or value systems play in the novel?

7. How does Kay depict marital relationships in the novel? Sexual attractions and sexual interactions between men and women? How do those (and other? – parent-child, sibling, servant-employer, etc.) domestic relationships intersect with the public world that the characters are also engaged with?

8. Who are the Lions of Al-Rassan? How does the lion image or metaphor show up in Ammar’s poetry and what does that image tell us about his character and his feelings; what does the image tell us about the cultural context of Ammar’s poetry (since everyone agrees that it’s very powerful art, it must be touching on something in the culture)?

9. There are a number of proverbial sayings scattered throughout the novel, not surprisingly given that Kay is depicting a relatively traditional and not fully literate society. Keep track of these sayings and decide what you think they tell us about the world of the novel and its people’s values.