

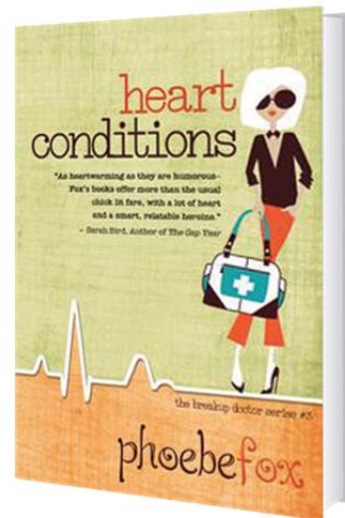
# phoebe fox

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## *Heart Conditions* Q&A with author Phoebe Fox

(Caution: spoilers ahead!)

*The Breakup Doctor series is about the end of relationships, but also very much about all other aspects of love as well, and how we can view it from both an analytical point of view and an emotional one. Where did you get the idea for the story, and of a character who wrestles with both the rational and irrational sides of love?*



The overall inspiration was brought on by a book that changed my life—literally: [He's Just Not That Into You](#). When I read it I'd been single and dating a long time, and that book was like a plank-in-the-face realization of what a relationship could and should look like—and what I'd been settling for instead. It's startling now to realize how much of a revelation that was to me, but it was (thank you, Liz Tuccillo and Greg Behrendt!). Like Waldo, once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it: I knew I couldn't have another relationship that was less than I wanted. And I didn't get into one again until I met my now-husband. From the start, he made it very clear how he felt about me: we talked daily, for hours; we e-mailed back and forth, short and long, silly and serious. We “clicked” like crazy. It was awesome.

And *then*...came what I call the Great Disappearance. After a month or so of all that contact, he told me he was going on a trip for his birthday weekend. And I didn't hear a word for days. And so in the great tradition of crazy relationship behavior, I immediately inferred that he was vacationing with another woman, and all of the high-intensity courtship he'd been laying on me was an act and I was an *idiot*; I'd misread the signs again. My husband to this day shakes his head at this story—he was there alone, it turns out, but it was a *yoga retreat*, as he likes to remind me, and outside contact was discouraged.

Now, I'm a pretty strong-minded, independent, rational woman, and yet there I was going a little crazy over something that, looking back, I see was

laughably minor. And it gave me the germ of the idea behind this series—what happens when someone who thinks she’s got it together and has all the right answers finds herself acting just as irrationally as the people she is trying to help *not* be irrational? Bam. Breakup Doctor. It’s funny—I had been a little stuck in my writing until that happened, and the Great Disappearance (or as my husband likes to call it, the Great Psychosis) really shaped that first novel, and subsequently the series. So I now have to thank him for all that angst.

***Heart Conditions handles some pretty big issues besides dating, most of all the decision to become a parent. This is an especially touchy topic—why did you give Sasha such ambiguity about it, and was it hard to write?***

I’m fascinated by relationships of all sorts—not just romantic ones—and so in all the books of the series my characters wrestle with real-life issues that I think most of us face—how our relationships with our parents can morph as we (and they) “grow up”; what friendship asks of us, and how our friendships evolve as we mature and develop more responsibilities; how we handle our relationship with ourselves. This last idea is particularly part of Brook’s journey, as she learns to be comfortable with emotion, and the lack of control that can often accompany it.

With Sasha’s arc in this story, I wanted to explore the idea that not everyone is automatically born wanting to be a parent. I think it’s absolutely the right path for some—I know people who seem to have known all their lives that they wanted kids, like my brother. And for others, I think it’s absolutely the wrong path—one of my best friends asked her mom at age 13 if she could have a hysterectomy, and she’s never wavered from not wanting children. I fall somewhere in the middle, and I think a lot of us do. Maybe we want kids, maybe not—and a lot of times I think it’s easy to just sort of stumble down either path.

But I think having conflicted feelings about it is more normal than not. Even if you’re dying to have kids, actually getting pregnant, giving birth, being responsible for a child’s entire existence—that can be terrifying. And I think that’s normal, and actually a good, healthy fear of this enormous responsibility probably makes for better parents! So that was the fulcrum I wanted to show—how you can both want and not want those things.

And I wanted Brook to wrestle with it from the point of view that here is a situation she has skin in the game for—this is her potential niece or nephew—but it’s not directly her issue. Brook is a control freak from way

back, and from the beginning she tries to exert some kind of control over Sasha's situation—and Sasha makes that easier by asking for her help. But Brook's journey in this book is to learn that some things are entirely out of her control—and that sometimes there's not a single thing you can do for the people you love but be there. And for a person who needs to try to fix everything, that can be the hardest thing—to do nothing but show up.

And yes, it was hard to write for those same reasons—I repeatedly had to go in and slash-and-burn pages because the story dictated its own organic choices, and I had to make myself get out of the way and let them unfold. I honestly didn't know for a long time what Sasha was going to do, until she did it.

*So did you always plan for Brook to wind up with Ben?*

Oh, yes—Ben has been “the guy” since his first appearance, when Brook meets him in the ER at one of her lowest points in book one, *The Breakup Doctor*. But at the same time I don't believe in soul mates, and I didn't want to imply that Ben was Brook's—he's just a great guy she really likes, and later loves, and they are very good together, and good for each other. And finally, in this book, they get to a place where they're both ready to be together.

In the first two books Brook had other men in her life—Kendall and Chip—who were in various ways not at all right for her: Kendall seemed right on paper, but in the flesh there was a lot missing. Chip was all wrong for her in every way and Brook knew it, but the attraction was incredibly strong—and sometimes that can overrule our better judgment... ☺

In *Heart Conditions*, in bringing back Brook's ex-fiancé, Michael, I wanted to show that once, he may have been the right person for her, but they have changed and their paths diverged—for whatever reason. We don't always know why someone is right for us and someone else isn't—and I do think often it's timing. My husband and I both frequently say that if we'd met ten years sooner, we probably wouldn't be together today. We were different then, and were looking for different things—not necessarily the things that were healthy or right for us! I think that was the case for Brook—she had to go through what she's been through to know herself better, know what she wants, and trust herself enough to let go with someone else, to let someone else really know her, warts and all. But I do like to think that she and Ben are more suited for each other than Brook and Michael were, and that she's able to reveal herself fully to him in a way she never did with anyone else (except for maybe Sasha!).

***Brook advises clients that you can't be friends with an ex—but then she tries to do it with two exes she had her strongest feelings for. Why does she ignore her own advice? And is that your personal philosophy?***

It's so easy to give good advice when you aren't in the throes of heartbreak yourself. That's one reason I think that Brook's personal romantic struggles in the series really deepen her understanding and make her a better Breakup Doctor—and friend. Although her advice is based on solid reasoning, like so much love advice it can be different in practice than in theory: It's torture to see someone who dumped you whom you still have feelings for, and in most breakups one person still does, and it can keep both of you from being able to heal and move on.

Brook's sort of experiencing both sides of the breakup coin here—her romantic feelings for Michael have faded enough that she probably is ready to be friends with him, but it's Michael who still wants more, making that complicated. With Ben it's the other way around (or so it seems): His feelings have died down, but Brook's are as strong as ever. She wants a lot more than friendship from him, but I think at first it's more a way for her to try to wedge that door back open between them. It's only later that she truly accepts that that's all there is, and she'd rather have only that than not have Ben in her life at all. But it's a torturous situation for anyone if you still have those deeper feelings. So yes, it's my personal philosophy. I do firmly advocate that most relationships need a total cooling-off period after they end. I think you have to cut the cord entirely, at least until the dumpee feels that they could see the dumper with someone new without wanting to kill themselves (or their ex, or his/her new flame). That might take a week, a month, a year, or forever. The only people who know when that is are the two involved. After that point, sure, if you want to be friends, it can work.

***Why did you make Brook, the series protagonist, a therapist? Do you have a background in psychology?***

If by “background” you mean “tons of therapy,” then yes. ☺ I'm guessing it's tied in with the relationship-fascination thing I mentioned, but I love the study of the why we do the things we do—for a long time I thought that I would be a psychologist when I grew up. (I was the only kid in elementary school already considering the mental health field as a career path, I'm guessing.) It does help that I've had enough therapy to draw on therapeutic

conventions...and that there *might* be three or four shelves in my library that are filled with nothing but self-help and psych books...

But part of the fun of writing Brook is that, as the Breakup Doctor, she doesn't have to be a by-the-book therapist. I'm free to write her the way I want a therapist to be—or rather, what I wanted *my* therapists to be: someone who just told things like they were and helped me figure out what to do about them. I never loved the type of therapy where you dogpaddle around in your past and your emotions and now and then grab onto a lifeline of insight here and there (although I know that's a classic and often effective approach). I wanted someone to just tell me what the damn problem was and how to fix it, all nice and orderly and logical. (There may be a bit of Brook in me...) Brook gets to offer a lot of commonsense wisdom and hard truths that I think we all need to hear in the throes of heartbreak—but I also like that she tempers it with solid psychology (I solicit help in that area from several friends in the field) and, most of all, compassion.

*Have you always known you wanted to write?*

I remember creating stories from as young an age as I could physically write. I wrote short stories for school assignments instead of essays (which resulted in more than one letter grade marked off from time to time), and I wrote about my family (which resulted in more than one upbraiding from time to time), and I wrote regularly in a journal (which resulted in some of the personal neuroses I still enjoy today).

And then I moved to New York City to chase a career in acting. My dramatic pursuits included a corporate video that called for me to jump into a lake; doing interactive murder mysteries where I actually got shot in the head with the wadding from a blank gun and had to go to the hospital to have the hole in my temple stitched up; and a commercial where I played a fairy (yes, a six-foot-tall fairy) and was suspended from a flight harness for literally about twelve hours, nursing a delightful contact rash in my groin area for a week afterward. Oh, and I hosted a local game show for a year on the Atlanta FOX affiliate. I wish I were making some of this up.

When all that glamour paled, I moved to Fort Myers, Florida, and returned to my first love of writing, in the form of journalism, and loved that—I wrote features, a weekly entertainment column, a monthly health column, and served as the theater critic for our Scripps-Howard paper. And then journalism imploded.

I moved to Austin, Texas, and returned to my first love: writing stories. And after a very long slog to publication, here I am. Rather overjoyed, actually.

*What's the Breakup Doctor's best relationship advice?*

Trust your gut. Usually we know the right path to take—even if we work really hard to try not to know it. Our subconscious knows what's best for us, even when our hearts may want to ignore it.