



Christa Couture

RESILIENCE UNIMAGINED

An interview with Jeff Tiessen, thrive publisher

Christa Couture refers to herself as a “singer, songwriter, storyteller, cyborg”. She’s an award-winning performing and recording artist, a non-fiction writer, broadcaster and filmmaker, and the host of the AMI travel docu-series “Postcards From” which features a five-senses experience of a different Canadian city each episode.

Christa is also proudly Indigenous (mixed Cree and Scandinavian), queer and disabled. As a mother, she knows profound heartbreak and has shared her extraordinary journey in her memoir *How to Lose Everything*, a book that intimately shares her most extreme experiences and emotions in and around loss and grief. As a filmmaker, “*How to Lose Everything: A Field Guide*”, inspired by her book, won Best Animated Short at the Imagine This Women’s International Film Festival in 2021.

An amputation of her left leg at the age of 13 was the cure for her childhood bone cancer. A divorce, born of out grief, stemmed from her first child’s single and only day of life, and the subsequent death of her second child before his second birthday. Then more cancer and a thyroidectomy threatened her musical career and prompted a move across the country to start over. These are the stories that connect Christa’s dots of sorrow, despair and heart-one hope.

Photo by Jen Squires



As a singer-songwriter, her seventh album, "Safe Harbour", was released in 2020. Christa is a frequent contributor to CBC Radio, now calling Toronto home after living for many years in Vancouver.

thrive: *You live in Toronto, born in Peterborough, grew up in the Prairies, and lived in Florida and Vancouver as well. Am I missing anywhere else that you've called home?*

Christa: Those are most of the places that I've lived. When I was a touring musician I drove back and forth across Canada countless times for so many years. I feel really lucky that I've seen so much of this country. I don't know the experience of growing up and living in just one place.

thrive: *That wandering spirit, is that something that's always been part of your personality?*

Christa: It's interesting you ask that because I moved a lot as a kid. My parents were separated. My dad lived in New Jersey and Northern Alberta and Ontario. And he loved a road trip. Summer with my dad was going camping somewhere. I was always an artist too. I was singing all the time, writing stories, documenting our experiences as we went. That was my childhood.

thrive: *How old were you when you lost your leg to cancer?*

Christa: I was 13, but first diagnosed when I was 11, with Ewing sarcoma, and had chemotherapy. The cancer came back shortly before my 13th birthday. And so, the amputation. I'm very lucky. The amputation was the cure for my cancer.

thrive: *Let's start with life on the road filming "Postcards From". What's it like hosting a traveling roadshow and discovering unfamiliar places as a prosthesis-wearing above-knee amputee?*

Christa: It's a blast. A dream job for me. It's exhausting; it's demanding. Being on camera, I have to be on all of

the time. But it feels like a remarkable gift. I'm getting paid to go to new places, try new things, and meet cool people.

It's not a job I was looking for. The show needed a new host and it had to be someone with a disability. That was the first requirement. I'd never done television, but I've done a lot of radio and I've been a touring musician. I'm a performer. So, at least

I've been on stage and on the mic. And the fact that it is an accessible travel show and that it's for AMI Accessible Media here in Canada and it's for a primarily blind and partially sighted audience, it's really meaningful to me. I'm getting to learn a lot about how blind and partially sighted people experience the world.

I'm having conversations with people about what they enjoy doing. Not about how they lost their leg or why they use a wheelchair or whatever, but just who they are and what they love about the place where they live.

I feel like anytime we see a disabled person on camera, on stage, or anytime a disabled person is elevated, it's so positive as far as representation. Whatever stereotypes someone might have, I get to contribute towards changing that. And then for other disabled people, hopefully there's some, "if she can do it, I can do it too."

thrive: *Are you finding that there is a commonality or an essence of Canadiana or being Canadian?*

Christa: Canada is so big and so diverse. But there is some truth to what is Canadian and many versions of it. This season, Season Six, we've been on the west coast of Newfoundland and last year we went to Dawson City in the Yukon. You couldn't be further apart in





this country, but I'm finding that there's incredible community and creativity in these smaller places. I don't know if that's a Canadian trait, but I've been moved by the way that communities come together to make something possible for someone with a disability.

When you live in a big city, you can feel a bit anonymous surrounded by thousands of people. Everyone just goes about their day and doesn't look up. In these smaller communities, there's more neighbourly collaboration. But Dawson City, my God, has no paved sidewalks. Accessibility was terrible for me. Cities are more accessible. But in smaller towns, accessibility looks more like support from each other. People want to help.

thrive: *I'm not going to ask you to pick favourite places. But what have been some of your most memorable experiences on the road?*

Christa: So, Season Five, we filmed an episode in Drumheller, Alberta, what's called the Badlands. I mean, this part of Alberta looks like you're on Mars. Sandy and rocky. It's known as "Dino Town" and it's just dinosaur everything. I had been there with my mom when I was a kid. I grew up in Edmonton. I was there right after my chemotherapy had finished. We thought my cancer was gone. Two months later my leg was amputated. Photos of me from that trip are some of the last photos of me with two legs. So going back there with the show, I thought a lot about myself 30 years ago.

And then of course trying local delicacies, like Prairie Oysters. For anyone who doesn't know, Prairie Oysters are not oysters at all. They're actually calf testicles. It's a big part of the culture. The male calves are castrated in the spring. It's a "waste not want not" situation I guess. They deep fry them and eat them. The ranchers cooked them for me on the back of a truck. Kids love them, everyone gets in on it. I don't think I'll ever eat one again.

Whistler was a favourite episode because even though I'd lived in Vancouver for 17 years, I'd only been to Whistler once. I tried sit skiing for the first time. An amputee for 30 years, and I'd never tried sit skiing. I loved it.

I "kissed the cod" in Season Six in Newfoundland. In Dawson City, there's an initiation called the Sour Toe Cocktail, where a mummified toe, a real human toe, is put in a shot of whisky and the toe has to touch your lips. It's disgusting. I joked, "If I had known, I could have given them five toes when I was 13."

thrive: *Before we talk about more loss in your life and your memoir, in terms of your career, you've done a lot as a musician and a media professional. How does it all connect?*

Christa: Yes. My circuitous career. I started as a singer-songwriter in my 20s. I have seven albums and toured for 10 years and loved it. Then I had to take a break because I had thyroid cancer. I had my thyroid removed. In taking that break, I had this idea to write a memoir. And then out of the book came a project to create a short, animated film based on an excerpt from the book which grew into a series of five animated films. I'm so proud of those films. And then the radio work. I've been on radio, off and on, for years, which I feel was an extension of being a touring musician. I would just get gigs to host different things. I love radio. So, it all kind of connects through storytelling. I'm definitely a master of none and never really had a career plan.

thrive: *Your leg has a beautiful floral covering on it, and a story too. In your book, you talk about the experience of switching to a very visible prosthesis being transformational for you. How so?*

Christa: When I got the flower leg, which looks hand-painted but is actually a laminated floral print fabric, I did it because I thought it would look cool



Photo by Black Rhino Creative



and I wanted to experiment with visibility and taking ownership of my disability in that way. What I did not expect was how it would change the way other people saw me. In the past, if I told people I only had one leg, they would uncomfortably mutter, “oh... sorry.” Now, with this beautiful neon sign of a prosthesis, people come up to me with curiosity to tell me it looks cool or to learn how it was made. It totally transformed the conversations I have about my disability. It helped me change the way I see myself.

thrive: *Your memoir, How to Lose Everything, is certainly a testament to how difficult it can be to plan life. I'm going to let you take it from here and share what you'd like to share.*

Christa: Thank you for that. Yeah, a lot of my work has been about grief and loss. Definitely my albums, as a singer and songwriter. The short films, which are also called *How to Lose Everything*, came from the book. They're about loss. When I tell people about the book, I share what I call my grief bio which is cancer, amputation, death, death, divorce, and more cancer.

Losing my leg, of course, was a big loss and changed the trajectory of my life. In my late 20s I had a child who died when he was a day old and in my 30s a second child who died when he was 14 months old because of a serious heart condition. After that, my marriage ended. We couldn't survive as a couple through those devastating experiences. That was all in Vancouver. And so, I moved to Toronto to try to pick up the pieces and start over in some way. Then I got thyroid cancer, which put my career as a singer on hold.

All of those stories are in the book but there's nothing that compares to the loss of a child. My sons Emmett and Ford are my biggest losses, which will always be heartbreaking. I can say these things to you because I've had many years to come to terms

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with how to say it without crying. It's not that I'm not still heartbroken. I am. But I can talk about these experiences, and I've been driven to create work about them partially as my means for survival. Recording albums and singing songs gave me something to hold on to.

We all experience grief but at the same time it can be so specific and so isolating. In creating work about grief, I've been really helped by others saying, “I know what you mean.” But, in recent years, I've been working with grief less, which has felt good. It's now more disability focused or on other parts of my identity.

And I know this for sure: resilience sucks. Resilience is born of suffering. You will discover your resilience by enduring hardship. It's something you don't know about yourself until you struggle. So, in that sense, resilience sucks. Who wants to be resilient? It means you've had to survive something.

thrive: *What compelled you to write a book about these painful experiences?*

Christa: For years, I've used songwriting as a means to express and understand my experiences. But I felt compelled to create something more in-depth — and something that wasn't confined to rhyming couplets and chorus! It also felt like a chance to give back, in a way. It was through other





people's experiences that I got through my own. So, this was a chance for me to maybe help other people who are experiencing loss. Also, I wanted to offer insight for those who haven't had much grief in their life. Lots of people don't know what to say or how to react around grief and loss. I once did a TV interview where they picked up the camera, stuck a microphone in my face, and said, "So you've had a tragic life. Why don't you tell me about it?" I knew I seemed like a foreign object to them. While I have experienced tragedies, my life is not tragic.

thrive: *With all of your different traumatic experiences, what's the big takeaway message for readers?*

Christa: The final passage in the book is what I turned into the short film. It's only five minutes if you read it out loud. It's the advice I have for people in the immediate days after a loss of any kind. Whatever that loss is, my advice is to wait. "Time heals" is so trite and I don't think it's true. But the shock will pass and that does just take time. Do whatever is the gentlest way to get through those early days. And then slowly you will rebuild life around you. Unfortunately, there's no way to hurry it up. When people reach out to me in those early days, all I

can suggest is to just wait and do your best to not hurt yourself or others. Time really will take that shock away and then time will allow you to create new things.

thrive: *One more question for you. What do you think your amputation has taught others in your personal and professional circles?*

Christa: Oh, interesting. I've never been asked that. I have been asked, "What has it taught you?" But, what has it taught others?

I think some of the same things that it's taught me... a greater understanding of our bodies. There's such a pervasive idea about what a body should be and should do. And we've all been affected by that. I feel that for the people close to me, it has helped them undo some of the ideas of what a body should be able to do. The more we understand different experiences, the better. I think people have learned more about disability and maybe accept and love their own body as it is. For amputees, it's so visible. People see how we are "different". Whereas, other people might feel uncomfortable about their body but it's something they can hide. So, I think it's been helpful to people around me to be confronted with their own ideas of disability and what bodies are supposed to be like.



To learn more about Christa, her book and her music, or to follow her on Instagram, visit christacouture.com. Check out Season Six, and previous episodes of Postcards From on AMI TV at amiplus.ca.