

# Christina Scott: Science journalist (1961–2011)

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Christina Scott, a science journalist credited with democratising science in South Africa, died tragically in a car accident outside her workplace in Cape Town on 31 October 2011. A champion of science journalism, a science communicator, an author, an editor, a mentor and a devoted mother, she was just 49-years old. Scott, a managing editor of *Research Africa*, was giving a driving lesson to a colleague outside the company offices in Observatory when the freak accident occurred. Known for her irrepressible energy and passion for spreading the word of science to all communities, she believed that access to scientific discovery and information would assist all South Africans to make better choices about their lives. To this end she devoted her time to making science accessible by training young journalists, in print and broadcast media, on how to write and talk about science in an engaging way. She also challenged scientists to take their science from the lab to the park bench, urging them at numerous conferences and workshops to cut the jargon and enthusiastically share their knowledge and expertise for everyone's benefit.

A woman of substance, she was widely read. She was an incisive interviewer, always getting to the core of the matter, but in a winning and friendly manner. Her weekly radio programme *Science Matters* on SAfm had a dedicated following as she was able to get the best from scientists. Whether she was talking to an astrophysicist about space or a zoologist about velvet worms, she was able to make all scientists feel at ease, getting them to convey the beauty of science. One scientist recalls that being interviewed by her was:

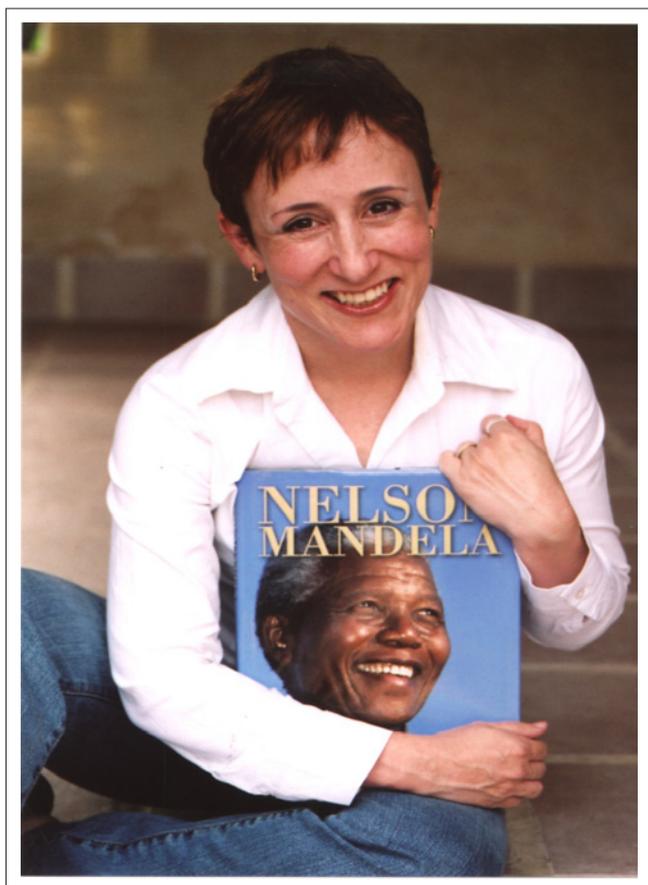
Like being part of a dinner conversation. You would seamlessly go into the interview without realising that the microphone was live and you were on air. That is the way it should be.

Her lack of formal science education, combined with a passion for the subject and considerable interviewing skills, made her the ideal host.

Scott was born in Calgary in Canada on 20 November 1961, and graduated with an honours degree in English literature (*cum laude*) at the University of Alberta in 1982. Travel soon beckoned and she packed her bags. Whilst abroad she met a man in Israel whom she married and returned with him to South Africa, his home. Scott then began her journalism career. She embarked on a Master's degree in Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Natal, Durban, at the same time lecturing to journalism students at various institutions in the province. She joined the *Mercury* newspaper in Durban as a reporter and later, in 1986, she founded and managed a groundbreaking news agency, *Durban News*, which specialised in reporting locally and abroad on the political violence in KwaZulu-Natal. She interviewed Martin Wittenberg, the secretary of the United Democratic Front in Pietermaritzburg, who later became her second husband. They separated 4 years ago. By nature, Scott was an activist, taking on the apartheid government. When there was 'no one left to fight', she turned her attention to science, a topic she loved and on which she has left an indelible mark. She never gave up on her convictions and last year, dressed in characteristic red, she joined the anti-Secrecy Bill march in Cape Town to try and ensure South Africa's hard-won struggle for free media remained intact.

In 1994, the South African Broadcasting Corporation hired Scott to report on the elections. She quickly became a presenter, and then a producer – being an innovator she founded the weekly *New Science* programme on the award-winning morning radio programme AM Live, winning her the 1999 CSIR Science Journalism award for radio. In 2000, she was awarded the Jack E Scripps Journalism Fellowship at the California Institute of Technology in Los Angeles, as well as a media fellowship at Princeton University in New Jersey.

Science reporting continued to be her passion and in 2003 she was invited to join the board of Scifest Africa – the continent's largest science festival. Her energy and determination to improve science literacy led to her giving creative workshops to school children at the festival, where she also instructed scientists to use props during their talks to keep their science alive



Christina Scott (photo provided by the Estate of Christina Scott)

and interesting. In the same year, she became Africa correspondent for two international Internet news agencies, SciDev.Net and Science in Africa. Scott's desire to tackle the quality of science journalism gained impetus 2 years later when she was appointed mentor for African and Middle East science correspondents by the World Federation of Science Journalists. She also won an Inter Press Service reporting award.

In 2006 she authored the biography *Nelson Mandela – Force for Freedom*, of which she was very proud. In the same year, Scott helped with the United Nation's climate change conference media training programme in Nairobi, Kenya and, later that year, she spoke at the first African Science Communication Conference in Port Elizabeth, hosted by the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement. Scott was also a media consultant for various science-related outreach projects run by the Department of Science and Technology,

the University of Cape Town, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and others.

In 2007, she became the first Africa news editor for the London-based SciDev.Net, an open-access international science news website which covers science research in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and regularly reports on research published in the *South African Journal of Science*, the African Science Academy Development Initiative and on ASSAf activities. A year later, Scott won the inaugural Third World Academy of Sciences prize for the public understanding and popularising of science in Africa.

In response she said:

Science is too important to be left to scientists alone...If we don't make sure society understands the issues, on their terms, we run the risk of alienation and suspicion – and that can't be good for science in the long run.

As the South African Science Journalists' Association's founding vice-president in 2008 and then its second president, Scott used her position to lobby South African editors to cover more science stories. She also wanted the voice of women scientists in Africa to be heard loudly and clearly, and gave them a platform. So it was that in 2009 she was invited to address the Arab Science and Technology Forum inaugural meeting of Arab women scientists. She also spoke at the World Conference of Science Journalists in London and later in Doha. Scott was editor of the monthly science section for the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper.

An advocate at heart, Scott aimed to support science journalists in Africa by making others aware of the challenges they faced. One of her memorable moments was an address to the final plenary of the World Conference of Science Journalists in Melbourne, Australia, in 2007, on the topic 'Reporting Science in Emerging Economies'. As she walked up to the podium, the lights went out, at which point she lit and held up a cigarette lighter. This, she explained to her audience, represented the situation facing many science journalists in the developing world, dealing with frequent power outages, low literacy levels and a lack of government support.

Scott is survived by her adopted daughter Nozipho (20), daughter Alexandra (14) and son Benjamin (10).

*Adele Baleta is an independent science writer, consultant and long-time friend of Christina's.*