This is the author’s script for this broadcast.
Audrey Evans had a hell of a life. Somehow she survived it all just long enough to write Many Lifetimes, her memoir, which has now been published by Bantam.

Audrey was one of ten children of an Aboriginal mother and a father who thought Aboriginal people had bad blood and could never amount to anything. It seems an unlikely marriage but it lasted through years of poverty and abuse until her mother’s death in 1953, when Audrey was nineteen.

By that time Audrey was a veteran of mental hospitals, shock treatment and crude anti-depressant drugs, and had been working on and off in a brothel for a year. She had a three-year old son who she had managed to hang onto despite intense pressure to give him up for adoption. She went on to marry a violent sadist, who she had the sense (or luck) to escape from before she was killed. But at the age of 26 she met a good-looking young soldier named David Evans.

Life wasn’t perfect from then on, but Audrey had been sexually abused by her father, beaten by her husband and raped by her brother, and against all reasonable expectations she had found someone who would share her life without abusing her, and more than that, would help her recover from the depression which had dogged her all her life. They adopted three more children, worked hard and got by until David died in 1987, in his early fifties.

Audrey then had the extraordinary idea of taking up her stunted education where she had left off at the age of eleven. Her school days were ‘brief but humiliating and unhappy’. It was assumed that ‘if you were black you were dumb and poor’, and were therefore ignored in the classroom. Nevertheless, she decided at the
age of 55 that education was the only way of providing a future for herself and her teenage children. At 59 she graduated with a BA from Griffith University, and from then until her death in 2000 she continued to study and to work in Aboriginal education.

Audrey’s memoir stands out from the general run of such books. Her daughter, in the epilogue, says she thinks Audrey wrote the story ‘as a type of therapy. … Before she found this outlet, she was an incredibly angry woman.’ Although she had plenty of reasons for anger, however, it doesn’t come out in the book. She writes with clarity and intelligence about the difficult times, and with understanding and love about her complex and flawed family, especially her father, who could be mean and brutal. Despite the handicap of poverty, racism and mental illness, she refused to be a victim. She had the strength and the wit to stand up for herself when it mattered – insisting on keeping her son, escaping her husband and the mental hospital – and to look for ways to improve her situation, like choosing to pursue her education late in life. Audrey seems above all an amazingly forgiving person, and Many Lifetimes is a testament to someone who struggled all her life for the basics most of us take for granted.