

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-storying ADHD: Lived Experience, Agency, and Self-Understanding in Tom Newlands's *Only Here, Only Now*

Omar Rihas

Research Scholar, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India;

orihhas2@pondiuni.ac.in

Accepted version published on September 1, 2026



<https://doi.org/10.26572/ghr2601604>

ABSTRACT

The novel *Only Here, Only Now* (2024) portrays Cora Mowat's bildungsroman, depicting her experiences of impulsivity, forgetfulness, restlessness, sensory intensity, emotional volatility, and difficulty with everyday tasks before she comes to understand ADHD. The paper draws on Critical ADHD Studies, particularly the framework developed by Andrew Ivan Brown, Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, and David Jackson-Perry, which challenges deficit-oriented accounts of ADHD. The framework is also used to emphasise situated knowledge, experiential knowledge, agency, and the re-storying of ADHD to help analyse the novel. The paper argues that *Only Here, Only Now* moves from a deficit-based interpretation of Cora's behaviour toward an account in which she becomes an increasingly authoritative interpreter of her own experiences. Her later recognition of hyperactivity and impulsivity does not create a new identity but provides a framework through which experiences that have already shaped her life can be reinterpreted. The novel thus enacts the Critical ADHD Studies project of re-storying ADHD by shifting authority from external interpretations of behaviour toward situated and experiential knowledge.

Keywords: variable attention; lived experience; cognitive difference; experiential knowledge; ADHD identity

FULL RESEARCH PAPER**Introduction**

Literary representations of ADHD have frequently been organised around recognisable behaviours such as distraction, excessive movement, impulsivity, forgetfulness, academic difficulty, or problems with self-regulation. Such representations can reproduce a deficit-oriented understanding of ADHD when behaviour is treated primarily as evidence of what the individual lacks. Brown et al. (2024) identify this tendency within what they describe as the pathology paradigm, where ADHD is commonly understood through diagnostic criteria, cognitive deficits, and externally observed manifestations rather than through lived experience. They note that cognitive-deficit models commonly privilege observable behaviour over the phenomenology of ADHD experience (Brown et al. 43).

Critical ADHD Studies develop partly in response to this problem. Brown et al. describe the emerging field as encompassing several overlapping approaches, including strength-based, cognitive-difference, and phenomenological or community-based approaches. Although these approaches differ, they share a concern with moving ADHDers from objects of knowledge toward agents and credible witnesses of their own lives (Brown et al. 42). Their formulation of Critical ADHD Studies is particularly concerned with “re-storying” ADHD, challenging what they call the “medicalized storytelling of lack” and attending to ADHDers’ own situated and experiential knowledge (Brown et al. 47-48).

Tom Newlands’s *Only Here, Only Now* offers a particularly productive literary text through which to examine this proposition. The novel follows Cora Mowat across three stages of her life, beginning in Muircross in 1994, moving to Abbotsraig in 1996, and ending in Glasgow in 1998. Cora’s ADHD is not initially presented through a formal diagnostic explanation. Instead, readers encounter her through a first-person account shaped by forgetfulness, impulsivity, sensory responsiveness, intense emotional reactions, rapid associative thinking, and difficulty carrying out ordinary tasks. The novel’s interest, therefore, lies not simply in the representation of an ADHD character. It concerns how Cora understands herself when others have already provided explanations for her behaviour. At school, she is treated as lazy, disruptive, excessively talkative, or inattentive. As the novel progresses, information about hyperactivity gives Cora a lens through which to interpret her experiences. She keeps the material, returns to it years later, and starts to articulate her own understanding of impulsivity and hyperactivity. The paper argues that *Only Here, Only Now* performs

the re-storying of ADHD proposed by Critical ADHD Studies. The novel does not erase difficulty or convert every ADHD-associated trait into a strength. But rather, it shifts the authority through which Cora's experiences acquire meaning. The movement is from being interpreted by others to becoming an interpreter of oneself.

Critical ADHD Studies and the Question of Experience

One of the core points of this reading is that ADHD cannot be adequately understood by supervising only observable behaviour. Within the pathology paradigm, Brown et al. explain that ADHD cognition and symptoms are commonly defined through models of cognitive deficits. These approaches prioritise "externally observed manifestations", which are the observable behaviours, rather than the "experienced phenomenology" of the ADHDer (Brown et al. 43). Critical ADHD Studies challenge this by asking how knowledge about ADHD is produced and whose knowledge is given authority.

Brown et al. argue that a limitation of both the pathology paradigm and some diagnosis-critical approaches is their tendency to focus on ADHD rather than ADHDers. Such approaches can inadvertently transform ADHDers into objects of explanation while reducing their capacity to speak authoritatively about their own experience (Brown et al. 47). Their alternative is to feature situated and experiential knowledge, along with the agency of ADHDers as autonomous actors and credible witnesses of their own lives (Brown et al. 47-48). Rosqvist et al. develop this orientation through their account of variable attention. Their study seeks to counter-narrate ADHD from deficit toward difference, drawing on the experiences of ADHDers. Attention is treated not as a simple core deficiency but as an interest-based and variable trait of different modes and intensities. They put forward the notion that such experiences can be understood as forms of human variation (Rosqvist et al. 3647-48).

Their argument is useful for analysing the novel, as Cora is not consistently inattentive. Her attention can become intense, intrusive, associative, sensory, or highly focused, depending on what captures her interest. This prolonged state of highly focused attention is colloquially called hyperfocus. Hupfeld et al. similarly identify such episodes among people with ADHD and note the importance of context in experiences of hyperfocus (Hupfeld et al. 191-92). The point is not to diagnose Cora through clinical research but to use this research to challenge the assumption that ADHD can be represented simply as an absence of attention.

Research on lived experiences of ADHD also underscores the significance of self-understanding in the novel. Shattel et al.'s qualitative study of childhood ADHD

found recurring experiences of difference, misunderstanding, and struggle across home, school, and friendships. Fleischmann and Miller's study of adults diagnosed later in life is also relevant to the relationship between diagnosis and biography. Their participants described internalised negative judgments and self-blame before diagnosis. After diagnosis, many were able to have a more coherent interpretation of their difficulties and develop a less self-blaming understanding of their lives (Fleischmann and Miller 47-60).

Experiencing Difference Before Having a Name

In the novel, Cora's experience is shown before a diagnosis. In the beginning, her attention rapidly shifts among bodily sensations, environmental sounds, memories, imaginative possibilities, and immediate desires. While sitting in the Causeway Field, she shifts from the physical discomfort of the heat to an elaborate fantasy about climbing into the supermarket freezer and staying there until the school bell rings (Newlands 8). This shows that Cora is not represented as mentally vacant. Her mind is constantly producing associations. This mode of attention becomes particularly visible when she meets Dennis. Her mind immediately begins projecting imagined future events, moving from the immediate encounter toward an elaborate scenario involving his car, music, escape from Muircross, and a possible romantic relationship. She describes her brain as "jumping ten chapters ahead" (Newlands 27). This is not simply a distraction from the present. Her attention is intensely engaged with a rapidly expanding field of possibilities. Such moments correspond with Rosqvist et al.'s distinction between deficit-oriented accounts and variable or interest-based attention. Their participants describe attention as shifting in intensity and responding to particular interests and contexts rather than functioning as a uniformly available capacity (Rosqvist et al. 3647-49). Cora's experience similarly resists the binary distinction between attention and inattention. She can be intensely absorbed in a possibility yet unable to regulate where her attention goes next.

The novel also represents attention as embodied. Cora can be seen frequently recognising sounds, textures, smells, physical discomforts, and movement while processing social situations. When Jo tells her that her mother has a new partner, Cora describes the experience as "There was a clamping round my belly and a wee nettle-sting feeling moving upwards, inside. Everything got urgent so I looked at the ground to try and not give anything away. Slug tracks were sparkling in the sun like strands of fancy fabric. I started using the toe of my Reebok to trace one, dodging the dods of seagull shite, making a game of it" (Newlands 14). This is not simply to illustrate a list of ADHD symptoms. The narrative shows Cora's experience of the world as densely

populated by stimuli. The novel allows the reader to encounter Cora's experience from the inside rather than reducing it to the judgments imposed on her from the outside.

The Deficit Story and Cora's Self-Blame

The world around Cora often interprets her behaviour through a deficit lens. School comes to the forefront as it provides a vocabulary through which Cora's difficulties become moralised. The teacher's questions about why she cannot apply herself, why she sings during class, and how an intelligent girl can forget so much bring attention to the lived reality of ADHD, which causes difficulties for the protagonist. The judgment extends beyond Cora's immediate academic difficulties and shapes the bleak future she imagines for herself: "This was my future—bus stops, bobbled V-necks, pencil shavings, second bell. Teachers thinking I'm a lazy moo. Seagull shite on the Reeboks. Chucking chairs in the sea. Brown envelopes, waiting lists, months of my mam's disappointments and rage. Emptying torn-up bingo cards out the bathroom bin. Feeling ashamed." (Newlands 62-63). This future, in which it is implied that her limitations could have been overcome had she simply applied herself, is the form of interpretation that Brown et al. describe as a medicalised story of lack. The problem is not simply that a person has difficulty, but using such a difficulty as evidence of an inadequate self. The individual is held responsible for failing to conform to so-called norms.

Cora begins to internalise such language. When Jo explains that their mother is happier with her new partner, Cora wonders whether she should have noticed earlier and thinks, "Maybe if I'd paid attention" (Newlands 14). The statement is vital as it shows how her mother's external expectations and failure to meet them lead Cora to self-evaluation. Cora does not merely experience difficulty paying attention; she understands her failure to notice something as potentially responsible for the difficulties within her family. Her school experience produces a similar form of self-questioning. Cora describes herself as late, forgetful, talkative, and unable to remain still. After her mother's death, teachers repeatedly interpret her behaviour through grief, although she recognises that these same difficulties existed while her mother was alive. She therefore faces a double problem: her own difficulties remain unexplained, while the explanations offered by adults do not adequately align with her experience. Shattell et al.'s study of childhood ADHD is relevant here because participants described childhood experiences of difference, misunderstanding, and struggle across the contexts of home, school, and friendship. The study demonstrates that the novel's emphasis on misunderstanding is consistent with documented accounts of childhood ADHD experience.

The Printouts and the Recovery of Experiential Knowledge

Samantha's ADHD information provides the first alternative to the deficit story. She suggests that Cora should be assessed for anxiety and hyperactivity. When Cora reads the material, she feels that it describes her closely enough to suggest that perhaps everything is not her fault. This moment is significant because the information does not change Cora's behaviour. It changes the possible interpretation of that behaviour. Cora nevertheless does not immediately accept the framework or pursue assessment. The printouts become an object she keeps. When she later sorts through materials from her past, the ADHD printouts are among the last things she considers destroying. Instead, she folds them and puts them back in her pocket. They become a material reminder of a possible explanation that she has never fully articulated. This aspect of the novel resonates with Fleischmann and Miller's research on adults diagnosed with ADHD later in life. Their participants commonly reported self-blame before diagnosis and a more coherent interpretation of earlier difficulties after diagnosis (Fleischmann and Miller 47-60). Cora's experience follows a related pattern, though the novel deliberately leaves her position more uncertain. She receives a possible explanation but does not immediately submit to it. The distinction is important within Critical ADHD Studies because Brown et al. do not propose simply replacing one authoritative explanation with another. They emphasise the epistemic importance of ADHDers' own experiences and call for a shift from speaking about ADHD communities to speaking with or from them (Brown et al. 48-49). Cora's eventual self-understanding similarly develops through a negotiation between externally available knowledge about ADHD and her own experience.

Variable Attention as Lived Difference

Cora eventually provides an account of what she experiences. The passage, "It stops you—reading, listening, washing. It's not that you forget, you just can't make yourself do stuff. I wake up sometimes and there's this pressure right away, like there are things for me to do, that I have to be somewhere doing them, somewhere away from where I am. There doesn't seem to be any time to stop or think." I went back on my elbows. "Then I rush into another room and say to myself, Why am I here? But there isn't anything. You can't do one thing because you're already onto the next. It's a cycle. Sometimes it feels like I'm trapped. Like I can't even look after myself. My thoughts are paralyzed." (Newlands 258).

Rosqvist et al. describe variable attention as an alternative to deficit-oriented accounts that treat attention as a single, stable capacity (Rosqvist et al. 3648-49). Their

research also emphasises that intensity can be experienced as exhausting or harmful in some circumstances, while in others it can be productive or pleasurable (Rosqvist et al. 3654- 55). Cora is not reduced to a mere clinical checklist. Her account of feeling intensely activated by "every little thing," while she is simultaneously unable to make herself perform basic tasks, lets this variability be experienced. Cora also develops practical strategies of her own. She makes lists, keeps a tray for organising her things, and uses her Walkman to reduce the surrounding noise. She does not necessarily understand why these methods work, but she knows through experience that they do (Newlands 258). This moment is particularly important because Cora becomes a source of knowledge about her own experience. Her strategies are not presented as miraculous solutions or as therapeutic prescriptions. They are forms of situated knowledge. Brown et al. explicitly place situated experiential knowledge at the centre of Critical ADHD Studies and argue that such knowledge can challenge disciplinary accounts that are detached from lived experience (Brown et al. 52-53). Cora's statement that she is not changing herself "to please other folk" further demonstrates this shift (Newlands 258). She is not rejecting help altogether. She is refusing to define help as the elimination of everything other people find difficult about her. That distinction is central to an ADHD-affirmative interpretation.

Impulsivity and the Re-storying of Action

In the latter half of the novel, an even clearer example of Cora's transition from an externally interpreted subject to a self-interpreting subject is presented. When speaking with Vicki, she explicitly identifies herself as hyperactive and recounts her long history of impulsive behaviour. She talks about dancing with Kira-Louise and climbing down from a roof to speak to Fulton, describing the impulse as so strong that she acted before thinking. Newlands writes it as "Sometimes it looks like bravery, sometimes it's just stupidity. No control either way" (Newlands 295). This portrays how Cora begins to change in the way she perceives and interprets her own actions.

This is one of the novel's most important refusals of a simple deficit model. Cora does not deny that impulsivity has consequences. She refuses to treat every impulsive action as proof of an essentially defective character. The meaning of the action depends upon its circumstances. This is consistent with the contextual account developed within Critical ADHD Studies. Brown et al. note that ADHD-related traits can function differently across contexts, while Rosqvist et al. similarly emphasise that intensity can be difficult in environments governed by neuroconventional expectations but useful or enjoyable elsewhere. Cora's reflection, therefore, represents more than retrospective diagnosis. It is a process of re-interpretation. She begins to

recognise patterns in her life without allowing those patterns to determine the entirety of her identity. Immediately after describing her impulsivity, she considers that she may have lived with herself long enough to stop hating the things she has said and done. She does not say that everything was acceptable. Instead, she rejects the conclusion that these experiences make her a terrible person (Newlands 295). ADHD-affirmative approaches must remain attentive to difficulties while challenging the assumption that those difficulties exhaust the meaning of ADHD (Brown et al. 48). Cora's final position reflects this tension. She acknowledges difficulty, responsibility, and consequence, while refusing to accept self-hatred as the only possible interpretation.

Conclusion

The novel, *Only Here, Only Now*, provides an example of the re-storying proposed by Critical ADHD Studies. The ADHD material does not simply supply a diagnosis that explains everything retrospectively. Instead, it creates an opportunity for Cora to develop an alternative interpretation of experiences that have already shaped her life. Her lists, sensory strategies, Walkman, awareness of impulsivity, and eventual acknowledgement of hyperactivity demonstrate forms of situated knowledge that emerge from experience rather than from external authority alone. The significance of Newland's novel lies precisely in this movement of narrative authority. Cora does not cease to struggle when she acquires a possible understanding of ADHD. Nor does ADHD become an uncomplicated source of strength. What changes is her relationship to the story that has been told about her. She moves from being the lazy girl, the difficult student, the excessive talker, or the irresponsible daughter toward becoming someone capable of asking what those behaviours have meant within her particular life. The novel thus offers a representation of ADHD grounded less in diagnostic explanation than in lived experience and retrospective self-understanding. Its central achievement is not that it gives the reader an ADHD character, but that it allows that character increasing authority over the meaning of her own difference. In this sense, *Only Here, Only Now* exemplifies the Critical ADHD Studies project of re-storying ADHD: it does not replace one fixed definition with another. However, it opens a space in which Cora can become the knower of the experience that others have spent much of her life attempting to explain.

Works Cited

- Brown, Andrew Ivan, et al. "An Introduction to Critical ADHD Studies." *The Palgrave Handbook of Research Methods and Ethics in Neurodiversity Studies*, 2024, pp. 41–57, 10.1007/978-3-031-66127-3_3.
- Crown, Sarah. "Only Here, Only Now by Tom Newlands Review – Growing up With ADHD." *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 27 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/jun/27/only-here-only-now-by-tom-newlands-review-growing-up-with-adhd>. Accessed 14 July 2026.
- Fleischmann, Amos, and Erez C. Miller. "Online Narratives by Adults With ADHD Who Were Diagnosed in Adulthood." *Learning Disability Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, 27 Dec. 2012, pp. 47–60, 10.1177/0731948712461448.
- Hupfeld, Kathleen E., et al. "Correction to: Living "in the Zone": Hyperfocus in Adult ADHD." *ADHD Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders*, vol. 11, no. 2, 8 Mar. 2019, pp. 209–209, 10.1007/s12402-019-00296-6. Accessed 14 July 2026.
- Newlands, Tom. *Only Here, Only Now*. HarperVia, 13 June 2024.
- Rosqvist, Hanna Bertilsdotter, et al. "Intensity and Variable Attention: Counter Narrating ADHD, From ADHD Deficits to ADHD Difference." *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 53, no. 8, 27 May 2023, 10.1093/bjsw/bcad138.
- Shattell, Mona M., et al. "'I Have Always Felt Different': The Experience of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Childhood." *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, vol. 23, no. 1, Feb. 2008, pp. 49–57, 10.1016/j.pedn.2007.07.010. Accessed 14 July 2026.
- Tarczyska, Ida. "Only Here, Only Now: Q & a With Tom Newlands." *Books from Scotland*, 25 Apr. 2024, <https://booksfromscotland.com/2024/04/only-here-only-now-q-a-with-tom-newlands/>. Accessed 14 July 2026.

Publisher's Note: The author(s) are solely responsible for the content, accuracy of data, and any instances of copyright infringement. Global Humanities Review and its publisher disclaim all responsibility for such matters. Publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.
