In this brief, easy to read book, award-winning journalist Tim Marshall sets out to explain to a general audience not only how geography helps us understand motivations in global politics but also how geopolitics drives human history. In ten chapters, each focusing on a continent or major political power with a large geographical footprint, Marshall presents the argument that geography plays a critical role in political decision-making and the growth of nations, both now and throughout history. Marshall's analysis, while effective for introducing the concept of geopolitics to a public audience, is often reductive and simplified to a point that will make it unappealing to specialists. The title itself is simultaneously fitting and misleading. While Marshall does paint a picture of human societies and current politics being prisoners of their geographical circumstances, the ten maps in his book serve merely as an illustrative reference point at the beginning of each chapter, rather than as a true tool of analysis.

Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything about the World consists of ten chapters, each focused on a large geographical region, such as all of Latin America or the entire continent of Africa, or a key area of geopolitical interest, for instance, the chapters on Korea and Japan or India and Pakistan. Before each chapter there is a map of the region showing the current political boundaries and major geographical features that Marshall addresses within the chapter. Marshall takes a longue durée approach to most of the regions covered; in his chapter on western Europe, he begins with the formation of civilizations, presenting a general argument for how the unique geography of Europe led to the creation of multiple distinct cultures and political entities over the course of history.

After establishing this basic historical geography perspective, which tends to be rather reductionist in places, he then moves on to his true focus: how geography dictates the geopolitics of
the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Perhaps the best example of this is his chapter on Korea and Japan, which focuses on the artificial division of North and South Korea after World War II and the manner in which this artificial separation has continued to plague the geopolitics and global perspectives of the region to this day. This, however, is perhaps one of the weaker arguments of the book. Though he is correct in his argument that the current division line has no geographical imperative and that the nearness of the border to Seoul, South Korea’s capital, is part of the reason for heightened concern over North Korean military aggression, there is very little room within Marshall’s analysis for the driving ideological differences or the simple power of extreme dictatorial personalities. For Marshall, it all comes down to the nations being “prisoners” of their geography.

This tendency to overly emphasize geographical features and reduce complex historical narratives into basic geographical determinism does lead to some inconsistencies in his analysis. For example, in his chapter on the United States, Marshall argues that one of the driving features for US expansion and a united nation is the complex system of navigable rivers that easily connect desperate regions of the continent together. However, in his chapter on western Europe, he argues that the long ranging river systems of Europe are what allowed multiple different culture groups to grow and thrive alongside each other. Here, rather than seeing rivers as connective geographical features, he describes them as simply reducing resource competition among different societies.

For H-Caribbean readers, the chapters on the United States and Latin America will be of special interest, for it is only in relation to these larger regions that the critical geographical position and role of the Caribbean is mentioned. In his discussion of the United States, Marshall argues that the Caribbean played an important role in building the United States toward a world power, as US national security demanded an eventual confrontation with Spain as long as Spain remained in Cuba. While there is a brief note on the importance of US control over the Panama Canal in the early twentieth century for the global economic growth of the US, Cuba is truly the star of the discussion, as it once again becomes a location of great concern to the US during the Cold War. However, the main concern for Marshall is what he sees as the currently building confrontation between the US and China on the global market and for global resources, as China also looks for ways to build a canal through Nicaragua, which will place Chinese ships in America’s backyard. This is highlighted in the chapter on Latin America, along with China’s recent movement to secure goodwill and trading rights in many Latin American countries. Aside from simply being pawns in the larger game of geopolitics, the Caribbean receives no real attention in this work, despite its historic importance in the Age of Discovery and throughout the era of colonialism. The lack of global political players in the Caribbean in the past fifty years appears to place the Caribbean on the sidelines of Marshall’s discussion.

While a bit overly reductive in places, Marshall’s book does do a very good job of introducing the importance of geopolitics if one wishes to fully understand current events. This book is very well written, and, aside from a few frustrations for historians who find reductive historical narratives aggravating, it is an enjoyable read. This book could easily be used in undergraduate survey courses, or even Advanced Placement (AP) courses on geography or political science as an introduction to the theories of geopolitics.