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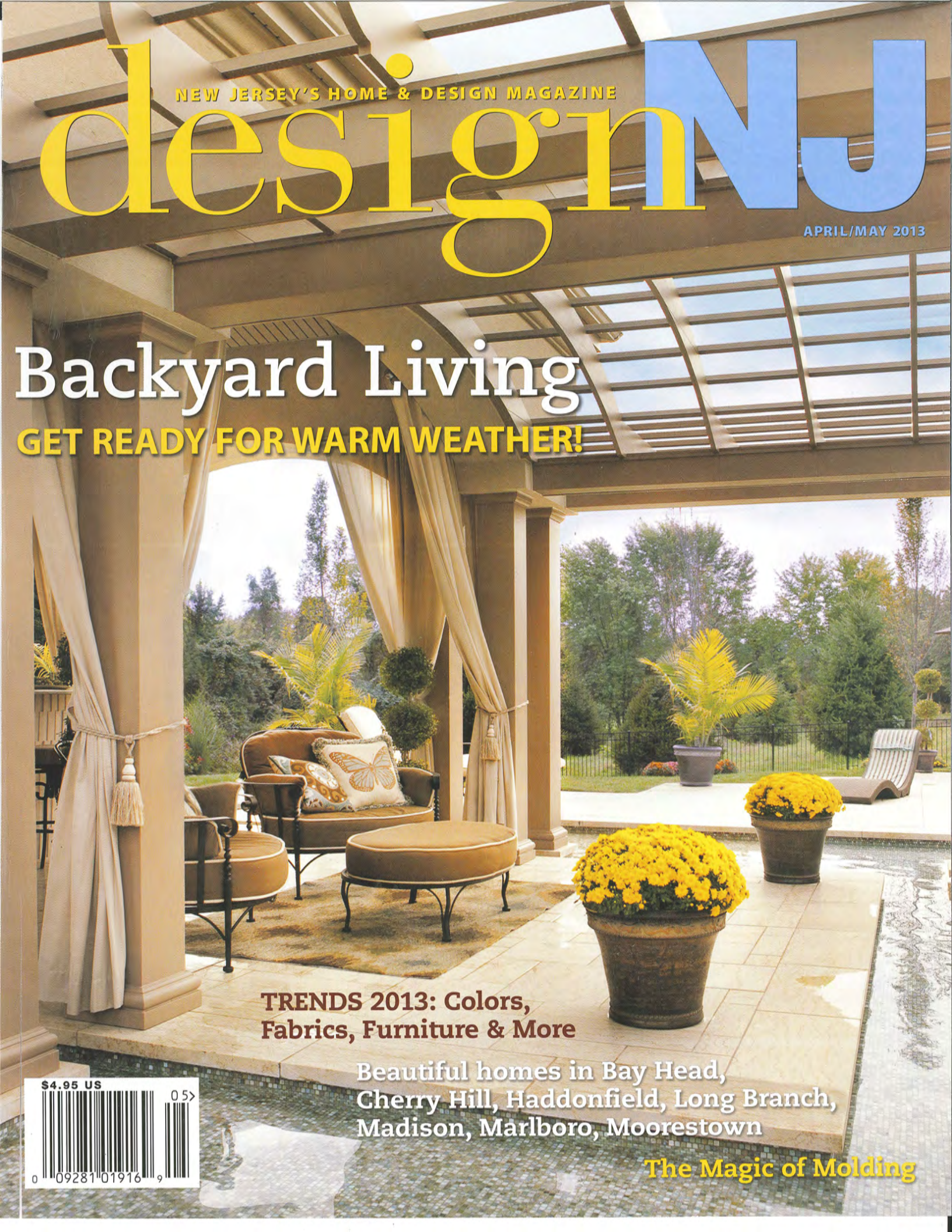

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The Magic of Molding

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The Magic of Molding

Trims and panels provide the perfect finishing touches in your home

WRITER MARY VINNEDGE
ILLUSTRATOR KAREN TAYLOR, K. TAYLOR ARCHITECTURAL RENDERINGS

LIKE THE WAVE OF A FAIRY GODMOTHER'S wand, properly chosen and installed moldings can transform a home. "They make your house unique, define your spaces and give you that wow factor," says Ryan Mulkeen, director of marketing for Kuiken Bros. Co. in Fair Lawn.

C'mon, isn't that hyperbole?

No, insists Karla Trincanello, an allied member of the American Society of Interior Designers and owner of Interior Decisions Inc. in Florham Park. "It's limitless what you can do with molding," she says. "It gives a space good bones so furniture, art and accessories look and feel better in the space."

Moldings can humbly hide gaps where walls meet floors, windows and doors. And moldings can be important design elements, serving as focal points or breaking up long expanses of plain walls or ceilings by adding shadows and texture. (Trincanello is big on embellishing ceilings with everything from coffers and beams to more restrained applied moldings, low-profile applications to break up what is "usually the largest plane in the room with the least ornamentation.")

They can make spaces seem cozy (bead-board wainscoting in a small breakfast room, for instance) or grand (wall frames paralleling a staircase). They also can set a tone, whether that's homey, elegant, casual, formal, stately, bold, restrained, or ... well, you get the idea.

STYLE MATTERS

Molding profiles align with a particular architectural style (dentil being typical of Georgian style, for instance, and flat trims a hallmark of Arts and Crafts), and they can harmonize with a home's exterior architecture or furnishings or not.

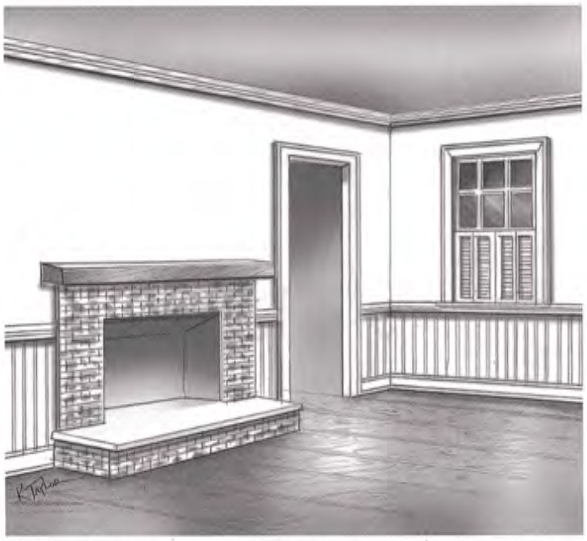
"'This Old House' on PBS has been working on a typical New England house but the interior is Scandinavian modern," Mulkeen says. Trincanello likes to paint traditional moldings (chair rails and wainscoting, for instance) a bold color in high-gloss paint. "You can put contemporary furniture in there, and it's beautiful," the designer says. In traditional and transitional spaces, she will treat walls, the insides of wall frames and moldings to different colors for striking effects.

Do stick with a single style of moldings through-

Georgian trims are brash, with baseboards and casings having bold shapes and large projections. Painted plaster walls and plaster moldings came into use during the Georgian period (1714-1830), and the plaster moldings later evolved into wall frames, or the application of picture frame-like moldings to walls.

Although the Federal period (roughly 1780 to 1830) overlaps Georgian, Federal has a much lighter, more delicate appearance with simple beads and fine shadow lines. Federal moldings are typically linear and crisp in appearance. Festoon motifs are common in Federal moldings

The Victorian era technically refers to the reign of Britain's Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, although the architectural style with its flourishes, carving and ornamentation enjoyed its heyday during the latter decades of her reign. The ornate moldings included rosettes and fluting (even in baseboards). Much of the woodwork was stained.



American country style, which is not limited to a specific time period, draws its design cues from small homes such as traditional Cape Cods and other cottages. Moldings are more functional (simply hiding seams and gaps where walls meet floors, doors and windows), with 1-by-4-inch flat stock common. Trims might include small-scale beading, and bead-board is common. French country style, meanwhile, is similar to Georgian, with large bold shapes but not dentil moldings. The corners of French country moldings, such as their use in wall frames, are typically rounded.

Check Out These Profiles

Baseboard

Also known as base molding, this trim is placed at the bottom of a wall where it meets the floor. It can include a top decorative piece called a base cap as well as a shoe molding at the bottom of the baseboard. Shoe moldings traditionally have covered gaps between the flooring (tile, wood, etc.) and the baseboard.

Rosettes

Decorative corner blocks, which eliminate the need for mitered corners, are used where the horizontal and vertical casings of doors and windows terminate. Rosettes are usually inscribed with concentric circles to resemble a bull's-eye; they're popular in Victorian woodwork.

Chair rail

This horizontal band of trim is attached to walls, usually on the lower third of the wall. In classical design, chair rails are installed much lower than they are in many modern homes.

Picture rail

This molding, typically affixed to the wall just below cornices, is intended to hold hooks from which pictures are suspended (instead of putting holes in walls).

Cornice

This treatment straddles the corner where walls meet a ceiling. "Cornice" often is used interchangeably with "crown" molding, although a cornice "typically is more built up," says Ryan Mulkeen of Kuiken Bros. The common application today, he says, uses a wide base molding that's inverted and installed flat against the tops of walls; the bottom edge of the crown is affixed to this base molding, and the top of the crown touches the ceiling. There also can be a base molding and crown combination that unite with other moldings; sometimes a top piece called a cap is used.

Frieze

A decorative horizontal band on a wall, a frieze is often created by affixing a strip of picture-frame molding to the wall parallel and below a cornice or parallel to and above a baseboard. It also can be used in combination with other moldings such as window casings or on mantels, for instance. Wallpaper borders or decorative painting may fill in the recess of a frieze on the wall; it also may be left plain, matching the rest of the wall or adjacent moldings.

Door casing

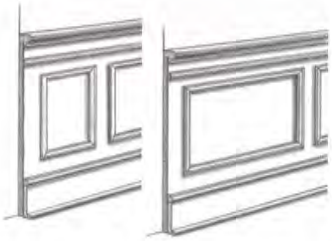
This molding, attached to the wall, frames doorways.

Window casing

This molding, attached to the wall, frames windows, with vertical sections abutting the sill. Window casings are usually identical to door casings.

Wall frames

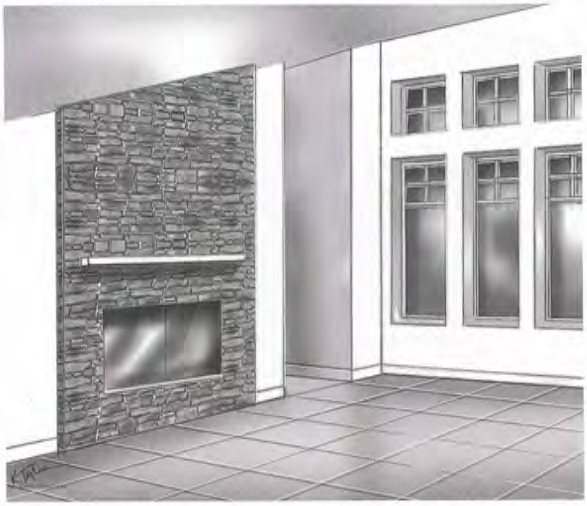
These picture-frame style moldings, usually rectangular, visually break up and embellish expanses of walls. They're often installed below chair rails (as shown here) or windows. They were introduced during the Georgian period.



Wainscoting

This wall treatment (usually made of wood such as bead-board or other paneling) is installed between a chair rail and a baseboard. It can be any style, with flat or raised panels or grooved bead-board.

Arts and Crafts style boomed from 1860 to 1910, although its influence was felt through the 1930s. Arts and Crafts style champions traditional craftsmanship and simple forms (flat, rectilinear). Large panels — up to three-quarters of a room's height — and tapered interior columns are typical in Arts and Crafts interiors. Hardwoods such as oak and mahogany were usually stained in period homes; homes being built today in Arts and Crafts style typically have painted moldings.



Modern architecture typically has very few moldings — for example, flat 1-by-4-inch stock baseboards and no shoe moldings. Windows often have no casings, and open floor plans often have doorless passageways of drywall with 90-degree (or other) angles or curves.

out a home, though, and "usually use the same casing sizes [3½ to 4 inches wide in typical homes today]," Mulkeen says. "You might be more ornate on the first floor — the floor that guests see — with panel molding in the dining room. Then you could go simpler upstairs, with a simple crown molding in the family-only areas. This saves money too."

DOUBLING UP

Moldings are often used in concert to increase impact and/or create distinctive looks. Combinations occur with base moldings (mated with a simple "shoe"), crown moldings and mantels.

"I often find that crown moldings are underscale for the room," Trincanello says. "If the budget does not allow for removing and replacing, I usually add to the existing [crown] and use a feature like dentil or other decorative molding ... to give it more body, and then I add to the top of the existing crown as well, which means the ceiling gets a little added feature."

And mantels are focal points, so it's important to get them right. "Properly installed, a mantel becomes a showpiece," Mulkeen says. "People will spend $20,000 on a sofa and $2,000 on molding for a mantel and have something just as defining."

Do's & Don'ts

Karla Trincanello, an allied member of the American Society of Interior Designers, and Ryan Mulkeen of Kuiken Bros. share these recommendations for trim:

- **Don't put too much molding in a room;** it's overkill and can make small rooms seem claustrophobic, Mulkeen says. Long lines of simple molding can make a room seem larger, however.
- **Do pay close attention to scale.** Make scaled drawings of the design so you get the proportions right, Trincanello advises. Mulkeen cites overscaling of door headers as a pet peeve. "Don't extend them too high." Both say chair rails should seldom exceed 36 to 40 inches, and lower is often better. When you go too high, violating the proportions from classical Greek and Roman columns, rooms don't feel right.
- **Do experiment with samples** to check scale and see how moldings meet up and work together. "People roll the dice," Mulkeen says, "and then they're not happy. You can see what it's going to look like by using samples; a 1- to 1½ -foot sample is usually enough, although a 3-foot section may be needed in large rooms."
- **Do seek expert guidance.** Examine photographs showing the work of knowledgeable people. Historic pattern books can help, Mulkeen says. Advice from lumberyard experts, interior designers and architects can help you avoid mistakes.
- **Don't forget about electric outlets, light switches and the like.** It's better to move an electrical box, he says, than to let it meet woodwork awkwardly.
- **Do think big-picture** about how furniture and overall interior design will work with moldings, Trincanello says.

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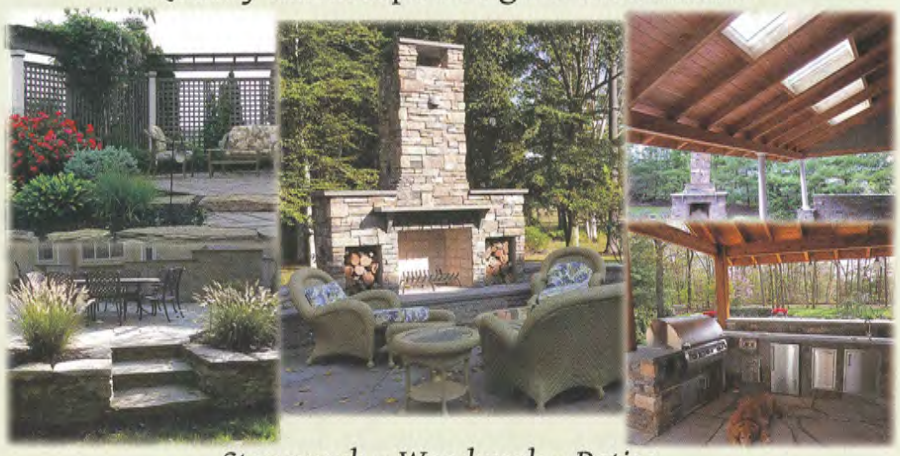
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WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT

That dynamite mantel and other properly chosen and installed moldings add value to your home, Trincanello and Mulkeen say. "Everyone loves an architectural element in their home, no matter what their style might be, so moldings and treatments add to the home's value [because] it's usually more appealing," the designer says. "Prospective buyers are always happier to see those details as opposed to flat walls without character." And Mulkeen says well-deployed moldings translate into "a sense that things are done right, that a true craftsman built this house."

So where do you start with your molding project? You could hire a designer experienced in using moldings who can offer samples and suggestions because it's "more complicated than most people think, Trincanello cautions. Or an ambitious and talented do-it-yourselfer, someone willing to study the subject and experiment until he or she gets the proper proportions, can select and install moldings. It takes lots of patience, Mulkeen says, because rooms invariably aren't square, creating challenges at corners. Quality tools, such as a compound miter saw, make the clean cuts that are essential to optimum results.

Materials matter too. If your molding will be painted, you can opt for:

- Finger-jointed pine, which comprises mini-dovetailed moldings that create longer pieces of molding,
- Pine and other softwoods, which tend to be blotchy when stained).
- Medium-density fiberboard (MDF), which doesn't warp and is grainless.
- Other man-made materials, such as molded polyurethane, which can be faux-painted to mimic materials such as wood and plaster.
- Poplar, the highest-quality paint-grade wood, a hardwood allowing for crisp edges and the best shadow lines, Mulkeen says.

If you'll be staining instead of painting, Mulkeen recommends cherry, mahogany and oak hardwoods, which stain evenly. DNJ

Freelance writer Mary Vinnedge has 32-inch-high bead-board wainscoting in several rooms of her Texas home. Contact her through WritingGenie.com.

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